Gender Writing: Representations of Arab Women in Postcolonial Literature

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Declaration

This thesis has been composed by myself and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Contents

To My Mother

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Chapter One

We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but it is a true part of this Muslim tradition.[1]

Fatima Mernissi

1.1 Introduction

The history of the Arab woman is not divorced from the national history. Arab women have been a field of confrontation and struggle especially in the colonial context where both the coloniser and the colonised sought control over each other through her. The coloniser, through his universal ideals of female liberation, sought control over the colonised. He used the female body as a means for subverting and dehumanising the local male. The local male, on the other hand, strove to control women as a means for holding on to traditions and resisting the coloniser's attempts to strip the nation from its 'spiritual' history and identity. The ongoing debates in the contemporary Arab World between Islamists and secularists on issues related to Muslim women are encoded with political meanings and references that, from the surface, seem to have nothing to do with women. Similarly, the way in which Arab women are discussed in the Western media and discourses seem – even if implicitly – to be engaging in debates regarding the merits or demerits of Islam or Arab culture. The points mentioned above highlighted the importance of taking women's discourses on themselves as a focus of investigation.[2]

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[1] Cited in Kabbani, 1992
[2] See Ahmed, 1992

Derek Hopwood in *Sexual Encounters in the Middle East* notes that the first question often addressed to travellers returning from the Orient in the nineteenth century is 'And the women?.' Hopwood writes that Arab women fascinated male travellers and the mysteries of the veil and the harem which they could not penetrate led to the wildest fantasies.[3] He continues,

> The desire was the mysterious woman of fantasy – almost always unfulfilled – and contempt stemmed from an inherent feeling of superiority and a realisation that many women were unattractive, poor and not what they had been led to expect....European men wanted to see and posses Eastern women without love, insisting that they were different from Western women.[4]

Arab women were a source of excitement to Western men. They were seen as exotic, sexual and more feminine than Western women. Nevertheless they remained to be the inferior section of the population. Hopwood quotes J.S. St John who approved of Eastern femininity but continues saying, 'Our ladies, of course are superior, because they are ours; but if they are more knowing, they are less women.'[5]

Rana Kabbani in *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of the Orient* notes that all Easterners were ultimately dependant in the colonial power balance. Women were especially so as they served as the colonial world's sex symbols and its accommodating objects. She continues,

> Since the Victorian imagination could not conceive of female eroticism divorced from female servitude; since in the core of nineteenth-century sexuality there lurked all the conflicts of power and powerlessness, wealth and poverty, mastery and slavehood, the spectacle of subject women (and boys) could not but be exciting. The Western male could possess the native woman by force of his domination over her native land; she was subjugated by his wealth, his military might, and his access to machinery. She was his colonial acquisition, but one that he

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[3] Hopwood, 1999: 147
[4] ibid: 147
[5] Montagu, Letters from the Levant, pp. v-vi. Quoted in Hopwood, 1999: 148

> pretended enjoyed his domination and would mourn his departure.[6]

Western men had conflicting images of Arab women. On some occasions Arab women were symbols of sex, eroticism and sensuality and on others they were witches, demonesses and procuresses. These kind of stereotypes prompted Arab women to correct Western misperception of them and to 'write back' to these prejudices and incorrect portrayals.

The Arab Woman's struggle for equality and national liberation dominates the literatures of post-independence Arab countries. This literature reveals that the rebellion of the Arab woman is a double one in which she rebels against colonialism/imperialism and the restrictive rules of patriarchy in society. Through employing discursive analytical approach, I intend to explore how femininity is defined and dominated on one side and how a feminine literary practice can resist this domination. This literary practice attempts to formulate ways of resisting power as it manifests itself in everyday life.

The principle goal of this research vis-à-vis other scholarship is to fill a gap in the literature regarding Arab women and to overturn persistent misunderstandings and stereotypes. This research focuses on Anglophone narratives written by Arab women that construe a postcolonial position within and beyond the immediate encounter between imperial culture and the complex indigenous cultural practices. The analysis of the chosen narratives shall attempt to interrogate the strategies used to represent the Arab female in the middle of traditions, religion, patriarchy and colonialism. With a

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[6] Kabbani, 1985: 80-81

feminist accentuation, I seek to explore the varieties of discourses on Arab women as manifested in the chosen narratives.

Discourses on Arab women today, as in the colonial era, reveal prejudice, misunderstanding, and confusion. Post-September 11th, the international media has made a striking connection between what many call 'Islamic terrorism' and the oppression of Arab/Muslim women. This connection has been important as it shows the centrality of gender politics in the 'war on terrorism' and the ways gender has been manipulated to reinforce the 'clash of civilisations' thesis of Islam versus the West.[7] Many scholars argue that gender politics and the image of the Arab/Muslim woman are two of the focal points of the increasing hostility towards, and misunderstanding of, Islamic culture and the Arab World in the present political situation.[8]

Harking back to the colonial era, the Muslim woman has come to represent the ultimate symbol of backwardness and oppression and acts as a visual signal to strengthen claims of an alarming rise of what many refer to as 'Islamic militancy.' The Arab culture, in turn, has been obsessed with oppressing women as a way of preserving culture from foreign contamination. This was further intensified as both colonialists and Western feminists claim that the only 'true' way to emancipate the Eastern woman is to adopt a Western model of feminism and modernity. Traditional and religious codes were used by both the coloniser and the patriarchal system as an ideological battle ground to suppress and oppress women.

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[7] See Saliba et al, 2002
[8] See Saliba et al, 2002, Ahmed, 1992,and Duval, 1998

During the nineteenth century, the Arab World witnessed many major changes as a result of colonialism, these changes manifest mainly in the rise of nationalism, the 'woman question' and modernity. The history of Arab thought from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards has been one of confrontation between Arab Islamic traditions and modernity, as embodied by Western values, thought and politics. During the late nineteenth century, many Arab thinkers found themselves immersed in debates about the identity of Islam in the face of the Ottoman Empire's attempts to strip it of its Arab identity in favour of a Turkish one. They also had to come to terms with Western modernity which swept throughout the Arab world through colonisation, Arabs who returned from Europe after studying there, and the Westernised elite who formed major debates on how the nation should be modernised and defined women's role in the process.

The First World War ended with the final disappearance of the Ottoman Empire and a new independent state of Turkey emerged out of its ruins. Most Arab provinces were placed under European control, mainly British and French. Foreign control brought administrative change and encouraged westernised education which resulted in the emergence of nationalism mainly among the educated strata of society. In *A History of the Arab People*, Albert Hourani notes that, in some Arab provinces, agreement was reached with the dominant power on the extension of self-rule within limits, while in others the relationship remained one of opposition. The creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine by the British government intensified this opposition and created a situation which was to affect nationalist opinions in all Arab countries and further opposition to the British government.[9]

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[9] Hourani, 2002: 264

As colonialism and imperialism expanded, European interest and curiosity in the colonised lands deepened and had more to feed on, as trade, residence and war brought increasing numbers of Europeans to the colonised lands. European curiosity expressed itself in a new scholarship, which tried to understand the nature and history of the people under its control. The romantic imagination, which was both distant and strange, and the knowledge or half-knowledge, derived from travel produced a vision of the Orient, one that is mysterious, enticing and threatening.[10]

It is in this context of knowledge that Edward Said places his definition of Orientalism. Although his book, *Orientalism*, provoked severe condemnation of the Western representation of the Orient, it is considered the starting point of postcolonial criticism. Said notes that Orientalism is the intellectual outcome of the European affiliation of power with knowledge. It is a Western cultural phenomenon which is related to the colonial and postcolonial perception of the Orient, its people, and its history. He suggests that the Orient is a European invention, it is the place of romantic, exotic beings and remarkable experiences. It is the place of Europe's largest colonies, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. Said further notes that the Orient has helped to define the West 'as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.'[11]

Said's book makes three major claims that resulted in criticism by many Western thinkers. The first is that Orientalism, although purporting to be objective and disinterested, in fact had political ends. It provided the means through which Europeans could take over the Orient. Second, Said notes that Orientalism helped

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[10] ibid: 300
[11] Said, 1995 (1978): 2

Europe to define its self-image through the construction of an opposite Other. Third, Orientalism has produced false descriptions of Arabs and Islamic culture.

Said posits a relationship between East and West in which he asserts that the latter has situated itself as 'positionally superior' to the former, 'which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.'[12] This superiority is evoked not only on a political level between cultures, but it also works itself into the structure of knowledge. This research stems from this notion of 'positional superiority.' I seek to demonstrate that this notion served the West to dominate the East, and the East to restrict and control women as a form of cultural resistance. The framework and analysis introduced will attempt to explain gender construction as a result of interactions between two civilisations: East and West. The idea that the East and the West are two civilisations glosses over major differences that exist internally in each division. The general division between the two civilisations is adopted for the sake of argument since it is the basis of dichotomies in the selected novels and does not reflect an authorial essentialist epistemology.

The following section shall discuss, in brief, Said's claims and contradictions in *Orientalism*. This is important as his arguments instigated the field of postcolonial studies. Through tracing the controversies over *Orientalism*, that are related to this research, I attempt to demonstrate how the colonialist scholarship has resulted in a native resistance. Noticing that Said's focus is only on the male coloniser, many have expanded this theory to include white women, such as Reina Lewis in *Gendering*

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[12] ibid: 7

Orientalism, and Judy Mabro in *Veiled-Half Truth*. Others have expanded his theory to include representations of the colonised that Said neglects, such as Partha Chatterjee in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* and Meyda Yegenoglu in *Colonial Fantasies*. I will attempt to demonstrate that the colonial discourse resulted in resistance in the Arab World, which manifested itself through nationalism. Nationalism, in turn, on many occasions, marginalised and oppressed the Arab woman in its attempts to resist Western influence. On a few occasions it empowered them through giving them an opportunity to voice and to articulate their resistance of both occupation and male domination. The Arab woman's oppression resulted in another form of resistance in the Arab World, that which resists both Western and patriarchal oppression.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire defines oppression as 'any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression.'[13] The word 'objectively' is the key word in this definition . A person is oppressed when he/she is treated as an object to be acted upon, instead of a subject that is independent and interacts with his or her environment. Further, oppression is characterized by the 'imposition of one's choice upon another,'[14] causing the subordination of the oppressed to the consciousness of the oppressor.

The Arab woman suffers from a double bias: a male bias and a Western bias. She is faced with complex stereotypes to fight against, not only domestically with social stereotypical expectations, but also from the outside, with expectations from other

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[13] Freire, 1993: 37
[14] ibid: 39

feminists. Arab women who fight against these stereotypes are often labelled according to the context. Although I point out to the different classifications that were undertaken to separate Arab women's movements from each other, such as Islamic feminism, Muslim Feminism, anti-colonial feminism, or Arab Feminism, this research does not attempt to find a name or a label for them. Each movement has a context of its own, and the Arab woman's struggle for independence cannot be addressed as a single one. Each novel in question demonstrates a context of struggle or struggles, but, more importantly, each one of them shows that women seek to become part of the struggle for a better world.

1.2 Orientalism and Beyond

In 'Representing the Colonised' Said notes that before World War II, the colonised were the inhabitants of non-European and non-Western lands that had been controlled and settled forcibly by Europeans. He states that by the time ideas about Three Worlds has been institutionalised, the colonised had become synonymous with the 'Third World.' There was a continuing colonial presence by Western powers even after many territories had attained independence. Thus, the colonised was a category that included inhabitants of newly independent countries.[15] Said continues,

> To have been colonised was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results, especially after national independence had been achieved. Poverty, dependency, underdevelopment, various pathologies of power and corruption, plus of course notable achievements in war, literacy, economic development: this mix of characteristics designated the colonised people who had freed themselves on one level but who remained victims of their past on another.[16]

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[15] Said, 1989: 206
[16] ibid: 207

Ania Loomba, in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* notes that colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world, but 'everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history.'[17] In his focus on the colonised, Franz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* demonstrates that this relationship has caused the colonial world to be cut in two. He writes,

> This world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.[18]

This division contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between East and West, one that was central to the maintenance and extension of Western hegemony over the colonised lands. It also created binary oppositions between East and West, which Said reveals to be crucial to European self-perception. If the East is irrational, the West is rational, if the former is backward, barbaric and sensual then the West is civilised, developed and so on. Said's *Orientalism* shows how knowledge about the East was part of the process of maintaining power over them, thus, 'the status of 'knowledge' is demystified, and the lines between the ideological and the objective blurred.'[19]

Said stresses that the knowledge about the Orient was not objective, but,

> a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them'). This vision in a sense

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[17] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 2
[18] Fanon, 1963: 30-1
[19] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 45

> created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Orientals lived in their world, 'we' lived in ours.[20]

The Orient and Islam were represented in the structure of Western discourse as an object for knowledge, investigation and control. Through the vast range of literature and historical corpus covered, Said brings to the attention the textual universe which draws an imaginative geographical distinction between the two cultures, East and West. He also explains how rhetorical figures and discursive tropes were employed by the West to represent the East.[21]

Said explains that Western desire to represent and to know the Orient is interlinked with its will to gain power. He evokes and extends Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge and power to include the Orient, demonstrating that knowledge is connected with the exercise of power. As a result, knowledge about the Orient, as it was produced and circulated in Europe, significantly assisted the West to dominate and control the Orient.

Said also employs Foucault's notion of discourse to examine Orientalism. He explains that without examining it as a discourse, one cannot understand the enormous systematic discipline by which Western culture was able to manage and produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.[22] However, a few pages later, Said states that Orientalism is a form of power more than a discourse. He writes,

> One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away. I myself

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[20] Said, 1995 (1978): 43-4
[21] Yegenoglu, 1998: 14
[22] Said, 1995 (1978): 3

> believe that Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient (which is what, in its academic or scholarly form, it claims to be).[23]

Nevertheless, as Said continues to argue, one must try to grasp and understand the strength of the discourse of Orientalism and its close ties to socio-economic and political institutions that aimed at formulating the Orient and giving it shape, 'identity' and 'reality.' This 'identity' or 'reality,' Meyda Yegenoglu concludes in a different context, essentialised the discourse of Orientalism as one that construes the Orient as the place of sensuality, corruption, mystical religiosity, sexually unstable Arabs, backwardness, irrationality and so on. This resulted in legitimising the Orientalists' inquiry into the nature of 'Islamic mind' and 'Arab character.'[24]

However, Yegenoglu suggests that Said in his focus on the binary opposition between the 'real' and the 'representation,' fails to look for a genuine or authentic Oriental identity. Said, she states, 'aspires to examine the processes by which institutions, practices, and discourses posit and designate an essential or original Oriental identity and the political stakes involved in such processes.'[25] Said argues, on one hand, that Orientalism is an idea that 'creates' the Orient yet, on the other hand, he says, 'it would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was *essentially* an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality.'[26]

Despite the enormous influence of *Orientalism*, for some critics the book evoked much hostility and criticism. In 'Orientalism Now,' Gyan Prakash argues that many

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[23] ibid: 6
[24] Yegenoglu, 1998: 18
[25] ibid: 18
[26] Said, 1995 (1978): 5

of Said's critics agree that 'cultural prejudice' and 'naked political interest' have often marred Western scholarship of other cultures. This prejudice, Prakash notes, was a mental attitude and a spirit of the time. However, he goes on to defend Orientalist scholarship saying that,

> Racist thinking and stereotypes may blinker the vision of many Westerners, as it undoubtedly did in the nineteenth century, but the ambition of Orientalism as an academic tradition was always to cut through prejudices and represent reality accurately.[27]

Prakash accuses Said of trying to pollute this 'honest' scholarship and claims that imperial interests could never be so overwhelming as to influence the writing of scholars from different centuries, nations, academic fields and institutions. Such charged responses questioned Said's claim that Orientalism is fundamentally a political vision and that the course of Western pursuit of truth, is crisscrossed with racist power and cultural supremacy in the name of objective scholarship.

Bart Moore-Gilbert, in *Postcolonial Theory: Context, Practices, Politics* elaborates on contradictions in Said's *Orientalism*. He notes that at times there are radical contradictions in *Orientalism*'s discussion of the relationship between 'discursive Orientalism' and 'the material practices and politics of imperialism.' This contradiction is derived from Said's own attempts to abolish the distinction between the two. Gilbert continues,

> On the one hand he suggests that the tradition of Western scholarship and representation of the Orient preceded and even determined expansion into the East, laying the foundations, for example, of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. He also argues at other moments, however, that the latter determined the former, so that 'modern' French Orientalism derives from the new knowledge which Napoleon's expedition made available.[28]

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[27] Prakash, 1995: 203
[28] Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 41

Moore-Gilbert also notes that despite Said's rejection of traditional humanist criticism and the notion that a critic can be objective by remaining outside the 'text' or the discursive field being analysed, he provides a criticism of the history of Western representation partly by returning to traditional humanist arguments about his own experience as an exile.[29]

Loomba points out that the most frequent charge of Said's book is that, in his analysis, Said concentrates almost exclusively on canonical Western literary texts. He ignores self-representation of the colonised and focuses on the imposition of Western power rather than the colonised's resistance to it. By doing this, he suggests that colonial power is possessed only by the coloniser, which in return suggests a 'static model of colonial relations' in which there is no room for negotiation or change.[30]

'Negotiation' is the premise on which Homi Bhabha disagrees with Said. While Said focuses on the coloniser, Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, on the colonised, Bhabha focuses on negotiating the space between them. He suggests that the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised is more complex than Said's claims. He argues that binary oppositions are crucial for both East and West as they are the starting point for identification. Both identify themselves in terms of what they are *not*. The process of Othering and stereotyping, for Bhabha, carries rhetorical power, as it signifies what the coloniser lacks in front of his Other, and therefore, the coloniser's identity depends partly on a confrontational Other.

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[29] ibid: 42
[30] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 49

Bhabha defines the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised on an inter-subjective level and conceives of the colonial relationship as being both dynamic and shifting. The coloniser needs the colonised in order to assert his subjectivity. Without the latter, the coloniser would not be able to build his subjectivity as the civilised, the active and the enlightened individual.[31] Bhabha describes colonial discourse as ambivalent and contradictory. For example, the colonised subject can be

> Both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces.[32]

Colonial identities are always a matter of flux and agony. Colonial discourse is contradictory and ambivalent in nature and the same can be said about the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. As a result of this contradiction, the colonised is able to pinpoint means of resistance to colonial discourse from within. The language of the coloniser does not reflect his voice only, but the colonised can also find his voice through the contradictions portrayed in the text.[33]

Bhabha notes that colonial discourse, like any other discourse, is based on signification of cultural difference.[34] Colonial discourse operates by establishing significations attached to the subject. The word 'Arab,' for example, normally means a person living in the Arab world. But the term in Western media has significations attached to it in addition to its literal meaning. This signification is that of a terrorist,

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[31] Bhabha, 1994: 38
[32] ibid: 74
[33] See Bhabha, 1994
[34] ibid: 34

backward person, and lazy Muslim. Similarly, 'Arab woman,' in Western media, signifies the veiled, oppressed, and backward; a woman who needs to be emancipated. In the Arab World the Arab woman signifies traditions, religion, and the integrity of the nation.

Within this field of signification of colonial cultural difference, Bhabha suggests that meanings and values can be '(mis) read' or signs 'misappropriated.' One can reveal tension and contradiction in the colonial discourse that might be unintended by the author, or use the signs in the text in a way that was also not intended by him/her. In this case, the colonised resists the colonial authority by revealing all the tensions and the contradictions and, above all, by revealing that the coloniser wrote such a text about the colonised because he/she wants to achieve his/her superior status.[35]

When such tension is located, the colonised deconstructs and reveals the falsity of the ideas and the boundaries of the colonial discourse and realises that these created identities are not fixed, but are in fact multiple, constructing hybrid identities. Hence, as Bhabha argues, the coloniser and the colonised do not exist in a hierarchical relationship as the coloniser claims; they are on the same level as the coloniser needs the colonised to supplement him. Therefore, part of the coloniser's identity is composed in relation to the identity of the colonised, which makes it not an independent but a hybrid one. Bhabha manifests in his argument the coloniser's need for the colonised and uses this notion to explain why in fact the West needs the East.

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[35] ibid: 34

In *Orientalism*, however, Edward Said has demonstrated that there are a number of features that occur in texts about the colonised countries. He reveals that these features cannot be attributed simply to individual beliefs, but are due to larger scale systems structured by discursive frameworks and are given credibility by power relations found in colonialism/imperialism. Despite Said's contradictions in *Orientalism*, he demonstrates that colonial discourse refers to a set of practices and rules which produced the East as a subject of Western knowledge rather than a culture functioning on its own terms.[36]

After attaining independence, the process of forming a 'new community' in the colonised lands often meant re-forming the existing communities, which involved a wide range of practices including trade, welfare, enslavement and rebellion.[37] The 'protection' of the native woman has appeared to be one of the most significant factors in this process. It signified the protection of the local culture and traditions from 'death' and 'burial.' The native woman became the centre of the nation, the mother of the new generation. She represents one major aspect of the struggle between East and West. The Western colonising power regarded the native woman as a symbol of the conquered land. They took the liberty to invade and colonise in the claim of civilising the indigenous people and liberating the native woman from her 'abusive' male dominant society. She became a field of struggle on both parts, the coloniser and the colonised. She has been a tool to resist occupation and avoid adopting Western values that are thought to pollute the nation. Nationalism and patriarchy are forms of resistance that resulted directly from this struggle in the nineteenth century. Nationalism affected the social and political structures in the Arab

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[36] Mills, 1997: 106-7
[37] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 2

World and had a direct result in the status of women and the conditions they live in today.

1.3 Resistance: Nationalism, Patriarchy and Women

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault suggests that discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity. He is concerned with the mechanics whereby one becomes produced as the dominant discourse which is supported by various institutions whereas the other is treated as the margin of the society.[38] In this sense, power as it manifests itself in a society is a key element in studying discourses. Power does not manifest itself downward in a social hierarchy but, rather, flows through society in a capillary fashion in every day life. He notes, 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.'[39] By the same token, resistance is everywhere. Foucault argues that resistance is already contained within the notion of power, saying that, 'where there is power there is resistance.'[40] Anti-colonial resistance took various forms that differed from one culture to another. In the Arab World, it was mainly formed by nationalist projects that promoted Arab nationalism based on shared religion, history and language. New identities were often appropriated for anti-colonial purposes. Arab nationalists attributed their own meaning of community or nation onto colonially created territories by drawing upon the glorious past of Arabs and Muslims, despite the fact that some early nationalists were Christians.

In *Nationalist and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee notes that nationalism can be a political movement that challenges the colonial state or a cultural construct that

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[38] See Mills, 1997: 19
[39] Foucault, 1998 (1976): 93
[40] ibid: 95

enables the colonised to posit their difference and autonomy. He suggests that nationalism is a cultural phenomenon, and divides it into two types. One type is Western nationalism, and the other is Eastern. Both types depend on the acceptance of 'a common set of standards by which the state of development of a particular national culture is measured.' In the first type, although there might be a feeling that the nation has its disadvantages, it is 'culturally equipped' to overcome any deficiencies. Due to global standards of progress set by mainly Britain and France, Western Europe learned to think of itself as superior to others.[41] As a result, any nation that does not have Western standards of civilisation is considered inferior and inadequate to rule itself. Therefore, the West takes the duty of 'civilising' these nations by forcing them to adopt Western standards of civilisation.

Eastern nationalism, however, has appeared among those who measured the 'backwardness' of their nations according to global standards of progress set by the advanced nations. As Chatterjee suggests, Eastern nationalism appeared as a result of the fundamental awareness that those standards have come from an alien culture and perhaps a colonising one. As a result, Eastern nationalism took a political and social form to challenge the colonial state, or a cultural construct in order to enable the colonised to 're-equip the nation culturally' by adapting to the western standards of progress and at the same time 'retaining its distinctiveness.'[42]

Chatterjee states that anti-colonial nationalism attempts to create 'its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society.' Anti-colonial resistance divides the world into two parts: material which is the outside sphere which is constituted by economy,

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[41] Chatterjee: 1986: 1
[42] ibid: 2

statecraft, science and technology and another spiritual inner domain of culture which comprises of religion, customs and the family. While the supremacy of the West is based on the material world, the spiritual world is the 'essence' of the Eastern national culture; one that must be protected and defended.[43]

Nevertheless, the East sought after adopting the material side of the West in order to progress and move towards material modernity. However, according to Chatterjee, in trying to approximate the characteristics of modernity, nationalist thought reveals a contradiction that lies at its core. The attainment of modern values implies its subjugation to the very same Western hegemony that it attempts to combat. While nationalism seeks modern qualities, it, at the same time, asserts its autonomous identity by claiming an authentic, pure and uncontaminated origin. Yegenoglu notes that nationalist ideology accepts and refutes epistemic and moral dominance of the West. It constantly tries to approximate to the Western modernity even though this approximation means its subjugation.[44] Ahdaf Soueif notes in *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*,

> The rapid changes undergone by the area [the Arab World] in this century have left people disoriented. They see themselves hurtling towards a Western model which they do not choose to adopt fully; they want to hold on to their own culture, their identity, while remaining part of the world community in the twenty-first century. Political Islamism announces it can enable them to do that. [45]

Chatterjee illustrates that nationalism is complicit with imperialism and thereby sustains the legacies of Orientalism and Eurocentrism. He argues that 'nationalist thought accepts and adopts the same essentialist conceptions based on the distinction

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[43] See Loomba, 2000 (1998): 190
[44] Yegenoglu, 1998: 123
[45] Soueif, 2004: 240

between East and West, the same typology created by a transcendent studying subject, and hence the same 'objectifying' procedures of knowledge constructed in the post-Enlightenment age of Western science.'[46] Yegenoglu uses this argument to suggest that Orientalist discourse reproduced itself in the Orient via nationalist projects whose fundamental principles were based on the divide between East and West. She notes that 'the object still remains the Oriental except that he or she is now endowed with subjectivity; he/she is not passive and non-participating.'[47] According to both Chatterjee and Yegenoglu, nationalist thought is just a reverse of Orientalism, and a reverse of the passive subject, 'the native continues to retain the same essential characteristics depicted in Orientalism, but nevertheless *imagines* himself as autonomous, active, and sovereign.'[48]

Both theorists illustrate that nationalism is contradictory as the framework upon which it builds itself is the same as the framework of the colonial power which it tries to renounce. Nationalist thought does not dismiss modernity, but rather makes it compatible with the project of nationalism. Both Chatterjee and Yegenoglu, however, warn against assuming that nationalist thought is a duplication of Orientalist discourse. They suggest that the relationship between the two is not mere correspondence, rather nationalist thought tends to be *selective* about what it adopts from Western modernity.[49] This leads to the divide mentioned above between the spiritual East and the material West.

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[46] Chatterjee, 1986: 38
[47] Yegenoglu, 1998: 123
[48] Yegenoglu, 1998: 123 (emphasis added)
[49] ibid: 124 and see Chatterjee, 1986: 41

In supplying an ideological principle of selection, nationalist discourse utilised this distinction between the material and the spiritual. According to nationalist discourse, the East can adopt the material but must keep the spiritual preserved. Women figured highly in this distinction between the outside and the inside terrain in nationalist discourse. They become the signifier in nationalist discourse, and a prerequisite in the process of forming an identity that would best pull together all forces of resistance. They are invested with a wide array of national symbols, customs, traditions and most importantly, religious meaning. The inside arena of the East must remain uncontaminated by the West, otherwise the features that make the East distinct from the West would disappear and the national identity would be threatened. In 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question' Chatterjee explains how this distinction between the material and the spiritual has been mapped onto the gender question in India,

> Now apply the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living and you get a separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is external, the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. And so we get an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*....Once we match this new meaning of the home/world dichotomy with the identification of social roles by gender, we get the ideological framework within which nationalism answered the woman question[50]

Home and women became the site for, and the signifier of, the national culture, which led to intensifying controversies about women's manners, clothing, education and roles at home and the public sphere. A new definition of woman appeared, which

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[50] Chatterjee, 1990: 338-9

was separated from that of the Western woman in order to retain a 'pure' and distinguished national culture. This new definition is also distinguished from the traditional patriarchal definition that opposes modernity. This 'new' woman, the guardian of the spiritual qualities of the nation, is allowed to move out of the physical confines of the home, but in a manner that does not threaten the inner core of the nation and her feminine qualities. In the process, her sexuality is erased through portraying her as the mother and the land so that her new role outside the home does not jeopardise the protection of the nation and its identity.[51]

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that since power is everywhere and working in all directions, sexuality is not something that power represses, but one that serves as a great conduit of power. The controls nationalists and patriarchal institutions placed on sex are primarily intended to ensure not only the preservation of the private sphere, but also men's supremacy over women. Sexuality is a social construct that makes women easier to control. While within an ideological view sexism is an oppressive strategy employed by men to intensify their power, within discourse theory, sexism is a site of contestation. It is the site where men are sanctioned in their attempts to negotiate powerful positions for themselves in relation to women, and also the site where women can contest or collaborate with those attempts. Hence, discourse on sexuality, seen as a revolt against a repressive system, becomes a matter of political liberation rather than intellectual analysis or political correctness.[52]

Within colonial discourse, imperial politics is connected to sexual politics. The conquered land was imagined as a mysterious, seductive, devious and vulnerable

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[51] Yegenoglu, 1998: 125. See also Chatterjee, 1990, and Kandiyoti, 1991
[52] See Mills, 1997

woman. The female metamorphosed into a field of struggle between the local man who was intent on guarding his national identity and the coloniser conspiring to conquer and deprive him of his identity by 'emancipating' the female body. Frantz Fanon writes in 'Algeria Unveiled,'

> If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the house where the men keep them out of sight. It is the situation of woman that was accordingly taken as the theme of action…[53]

The female body is a ground of struggle between men, be it in colonial, anti- colonial or postcolonial discourses. The repression of her sexuality is the outcome of this struggle, whereby she has to surrender to the male whether native or European. Kate Millett states,

> Through this system a most ingenious form of 'interior colonisation' has been achieved. It is one which tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring. However muted its present appearance may be, sexual domination obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power.[54]

Loomba suggests that the metaphoric use of female bodies varied according to the requirements and histories of a particular colonial situation. The Arab woman, for example, is overwhelmingly clothed, riding a camel, in an image that clustered around riches and plenty. The coloniser glorified her by associating her to royalty, or the 'harem' girls who were a recurrent colonial fantasy '[her] wealth testifies to the riches of 'the Orient' and whose gender renders those riches vulnerable to the

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[53] Fanon, 1965: 37-8
[54] Millett, 1997: 25

European self.'[55] This image of the 'Other woman' haunted the colonial imagination in ambivalent ways, she was 'barbaric' and 'uncivilised' yet she encoded the perfect feminine behaviour. So the coloniser took the burden of unclothing the Arab woman, 'civilising' her and using her riches and wealth. But, as Loomba suggests, Europeans were often supplicants in front of Asian rulers, and therefore found it hard to encode themselves as 'the male deflowerers of a feminised land.'[56] So the Europeans played alternative strategies whereby they effeminised the Oriental man, portrayed him as homosexual, or as a lust villain from whom the courteous white man could rescue the native woman.[57]

This image of the local man and his exclusion from the matters of the nation intensified patriarchy, and as a result he became more tyrannical at home. He seized upon women and the home as symbols of his culture and nationality. The outside world can be westernised, but all that matters is the cultural purity of the domestic space.[58]

During the nineteenth century, the 'woman question' took two forms. Some nationalists argue that through the liberation of women, the colonised can fight colonisation by achieving modernity. Women, in this sense, were given the right to employment in public social life. However, this liberation was short-lived as when the need for mobilising women was over, they would be sent back to domesticity or to subordinate roles in the public sphere. This link between the interests of patriarchy

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[55] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 152
[56] ibid: 152
[57] ibid: 152-3
[58] See Loomba 2000 (1998)

and the issue of national identity rightly leads some feminists to think that everything in the state is directed according to men's interest.

Qasim Amin is one of the prominent figures of the nineteenth century who adopted this argument of the 'woman question' and stressed the need to adopt Western values as the way to be civilised and modern. In his book *The Liberation of Women* (1899), he tackles the issue of men's oppression of women. He claims that the education and liberation of women are essential aspects of strengthening the nation against British colonisation. He argues that Eastern men oppressed and silenced Eastern women, which caused the nation in general to suffer. His arguments were based on a comparison with the West, in which the West is refined, cultured, and advanced, and the East is not. He describes women as a chest of gold owned by men who lock it and only unlock it for the pleasure of seeing it without thinking about investing it and doubling their wealth. His arguments caused dissent and discussion across the Arab World.[59] But although Amin was occupied with liberating women and allowing them to pursue education, he still regarded them as objects to be used by men.

Amin's work provoked many in the region not because of his call for the education of women, but because of his westernised outlook and his call for symbolic reform in the form of abolishing the veil. Many were against Amin's suggested reforms, claiming that the preservation of traditions is a symbol by which the Arab nation can resist the colonial discourse. Therefore the veil, among other traditional values, came to symbolise not the inferiority of the culture but the dignity and validity of all native customs. Leila Ahmad accuses Amin of echoing the colonial discourse, she notes,

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[59] Darraj, 2002: 3

> Amin's book, then, marks the entry of colonial narrative of women and Islam – in which the veil and the treatment of women epitomized Islamic inferiority – into mainstream Arabic discourse. And the opposition it generated similarly marks the emergence of an Arabic narrative developed in resistance to the colonial narrative. This narrative of resistance appropriated, in order to negate them, the symbolic terms of the originating narrative. [60]

Amin's reforms were triggered due to his belief that western standards of civilisation should be adopted in the Arab world. He considered women to be the 'face of the nation' thus if they 'appeared' modern, the Arab world would gain recognition as part of this 'civilised' world. Other nationalists, however, excluded women totally from the process of modernisation and from the struggle for independence claiming that women should remain in the private sphere and leave the public domain to men. This argument places women in the household serving individual men within the boundaries of the home. Both groups are controlled by many factors such as social, the economic, and class distinction. Each cultural and historical context is unique and requires its own specific analysis. To say that all Arab women live under the same kind of oppression is a major generalisation. In underprivileged families women tend to be oppressed more or in different ways than those in privileged and educated ones. In the same manner, the oppression of the African woman cannot be compared with that of Arab women. Both live in different cultures governed by different laws, traditions and power relations.

For the coloniser these differences were not substantial. He acknowledged them, yet for him all women in other cultures represented the conquered land and a field of struggle. The African woman, therefore, represented the savage and the barbaric, and the Arab woman was the suppressed, the veiled, and the sensual 'harem.' Both,

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[60] Ahmed, 1992: 163-4

however, need to be civilised and liberated from the native man and their 'uncivilised' cultures.

Both the colonised and the coloniser took the liberty of speaking on the native woman's behalf. Although their claim was to either 'liberate' or 'protect,' the native woman was represented according to colonial or patriarchal values and desires. Women became the terrain on which men moved and enacted their battles with each other. The Western man oppresses the Eastern and the Eastern man's form of resistance is to oppress the Eastern woman in order to protect the private sphere of his nation. Loomba suggests,

> …anti-colonial nationalisms so persistently emphasised their *difference* from the imperial masters…in the colonial situation women were used as crucial markers of this cultural difference. Colonisers regarded their position within the family and within religious practices, in India, in Algeria, in South Africa and in countless other colonised countries, as indicative of a degenerate culture. 'Reform' of women's position thus became central to colonial rule. Nationalists regarded this as colonialist intrusion, and responded by initiating reforms of their own, claiming that only they had the right to intervene in these matters.[61]

Women's experiences even within the boundaries of one nation vary greatly. Class, religion, family, and individual character account for heterogeneity. However, although diverse, there are similarities between and among different experiences of Arab women. The most striking is being subjected to patriarchal structures that oppresses and 'engenders' them.

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[61] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 192

1.4 Arab Women's Resistance

Sara Mills suggests that there are institutionalised constraints which serve to silence women in terms of public speaking. This is not to suggest that women are simply incompetent speakers, but that discursive structures are sites where power struggles are played out.[62]

Gender is a system of social hierarchy in the sense that it is an inequality of power imposed on sex and constitutes the sexualisation of power.[63] Arab women, like most women, have been relegated to the position of the Other, marginalised and 'colonised' by both Western imperialism and patriarchal institutions. Due to male domination, feminist scholars believe that women share a lot of intimate experiences with the politics of oppression and repression, and therefore have to find an appropriate language in which they could articulate their experiences of the politics of oppression and repression. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin note in *The Empire Writes Back* that, 'Women, like post-colonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available 'tools' are those of the 'coloniser.''[64]

Both feminist and postcolonial discourses exhibit strong feelings towards the marginalised. When feminist and postcolonial theories are joined together, they seek to reinstate women in the face of the dominant, be it the coloniser or a male-dominated canon. Feminism and postcolonialism share the belief that a canon is read in a way that privileges the hierarchy of the patriarchal or the imperial. The

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[62] Mills, 1997: 97
[63] See Hierro, 1994
[64] Ashcroft et al, 1989: 175

subversion of patriarchal domination has been an important issue in the feminist project as Western domination – has been to postcolonialist theorists. Contemporary feminists are united in their opposition to women's oppression by male dominated societies. They, however, differ not only in their views of how to combat this oppression, but of what constitutes women's oppression in contemporary societies. For example, liberal feminists believe that women are oppressed because they suffer discrimination; Marxists believe that women are oppressed in production, while socialist feminists characterise women's oppression in the home as similar to the oppressive experience of wage labor.[65]

Arab women are, most often, defined in relation to Arab men. They are considered frequently as inessential, abnormal and negative in comparison with the male. Men have built their society on a metaphysical myth in which they define women as inferior. The country, the community and the household had to have a leader and that leader had to be a man due to economic and socio-religious reasons. For the same reasons, many women accepted being the Other and the inferior due to their limited choices and dependences on men. This, of course, created dichotomies between male and female. It was established, then, that the male was the stronger sex and the female is the weaker one. Part of this research shall attempt to focus on how Arab women deal with this gender superiority in the middle of what seems to be a fact nowadays, namely 'Western superiority.'

The position of women and their role within the family and society has been the concern of many scholars since the rise of Islam. The present processes of

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[65] See Tong, 1989

modernisation of Western feminist movements have accelerated feminist discourse in the Arab World. Islam is the religion of most of the population in the Arab World and has a primary effect on people's dogmas. The question of religion is very problematic to feminist postcolonial scholars because it surfaced as a major factor in women's relationship with the nation. Many postcolonial countries have been repressing women's rights using religion as the basis on which to enforce their subordination. Although Islam has emphasised the freedom of women and their equality with men as one of its aspects, social, cultural, and political circumstances have resulted in different perceptions of Muslim women in society. Many scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, and Azza Karam, approach the discourse of what they call Islamic or Arab feminism and modernity in various ways due to the complexity of circumstances in which Arab women live. Many, however, believe that the term 'feminism' is a Western import, which is one of the reasons why this term, and the ideologies it carries, generates controversial responses in the Arab world. Karam points out,

> …[I]n post-colonial Arab Muslim societies the term is tainted, impure and heavily impregnated with stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes are that feminism basically stands for enmity between men and women, as well as a call for immorality in the form of sexual promiscuity for women. Moreover, some former present-day religious personalities…associate feminism with colonialist strategies to undermine the indigenous social and religious culture.[66]

Many feminist scholars were, and still are, concerned with the relationship between modernity and the West, and the emancipation of Arab women from the entrenched patriarchal domination. To a certain degree, the East sought after modernisation but not Westernisation. But if modernity is a Western ideology then how could the East

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[66] Karam, 1998: 6

be modern without being Western or adopting Western values? Women, as mentioned previously, are believed to have a prominent place in this struggle and in the distinction between tradition and Western modernity.[67] The colonisation process emphasised this distinction between modernity and tradition. As a proof of civilisation, the native man was compelled to approve of the necessity of women's education. But the challenge the colonised faced was to educate women without undermining social hierarchies and morality according to his social standards. The native man was after what he calls 'moral modernity' distinct from Western modernity with its sexual immorality and individualism. Colonialist and Western feminist discourses, however, insist that the liberation of the Arab woman must follow that of the Western movements.

Many scholars have noticed a striking similarity between the discourse of the British colonial power of the nineteenth century and Western feminist discourse. In 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,' Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that colonial discourse still exists today in the form of Western feminist discourse. Western feminists claim that the Eastern women should be 'emancipated' according to Western life style. She questions who decides who is oppressed and who is not? Who sets the standards for liberation? What makes the West think that these standards are wanted or needed in other cultures? Mohanty further explains,

> What happens when this assumption of 'women as an oppressed group' is situated in the context of western feminist writing about third-world women? It is here that I locate the colonialist move. By contrasting the representation of women in the third world with...western feminism's self-presentation in the same context,

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[67] Abu-Lughod, 1998: 14

> we see how western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counter-history. Third-world women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their 'object' status.[68]

Western feminists appear to devalue local cultures by arguing that adopting Western models is the only way to emancipate women.[69] Leila Ahmed, like many Arab writers, challenges European feminist discourse on women and Islam. She believes in the original and universal libratory message of Islam, and rejects the notion that a theory and practice of liberation for Muslim women can be found only in European feminist models. She insists that most of these models dismiss Islamic culture and values out of hand as totally incompatible with the concept of women's liberation. She points out,

> [C]olonialism's use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonisers and undermine native culture has ever since imparted to feminism in non-western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests. That taint has undoubtedly hindered the feminist struggle within Muslim societies.'[70]

In *Veiled Half-Truths*, Judy Mabro suggests that both men and women of the West are equally responsible for ethnocentrism. She notes that women in both societies, East and West, are oppressed to a greater or lesser extent, but by making assumptions that the Western life style is superior, many have failed to recognise the similarities between both groups of women. Mabro suggests,

> Feminists were as guilty of Eurocentric and colonialist attitudes as anyone else, and when Arab women began to be involved in nationalist struggles European women were often quick to point out how wrong they were.[71]

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[68] Mohanty, 1991: 67
[69] Abu-Lughod, 1998: 14
[70] Ahmad, 1992: 167
[71] Mabro, 1991: 13

Mabro explains that Western women often preferred to identify themselves with their superior race rather than the inferior gender,

> Treated by local people as though they were men, usually spending considerably more time talking to men than women, they [Western women] often seemed to be seeing women through male eyes. On other occasions, when they did visit women at home and found them apparently bored, imprisoned and ignorant, it may have reminded them too much of their domestic situation.'[72]

Mabro, in the above quote refers to British women travellers who left their countries to explore the colonised lands in the nineteenth century. She claims that if these women were not marginalised by their own societies and if they were satisfied with their lives at home, they would not have left. Mabro also suggests that because of their inferiority in their own country, white women felt the need to venture elsewhere to explore the exotic and the sensational part of the world. At the same time, the white woman claims superiority over the native woman since the Western life-style is considered superior.

Descriptions of Muslim societies were mostly distorted and misconstructed by Orientalists.[73] The issue of women and Islam emerged as central in Western illustration when Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries. Many Western women shared with the white man almost the same colonialist perception of native women, despite suffering from oppression in their homelands. Mabro quotes many male and female travellers in her book. I choose to quote one by Suzanne Voilquin who lived in Egypt from 1834 to 1836 and developed

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[72] Mabro, 1991: 12
[73] See Said, 1995 (1978)

an interesting theory about Arab women's appearance and their emancipation. She says,

> The first Arab women whom I saw frightened me…but my eyes soon became accustomed to these types of ghosts, of whom one can only distinguish the eyes – generally very beautiful…Look at their eyes, they are beautiful, expressive, full of provocative languor. As for the veiled features, they are not used in social relationships…Oh, wise people, all this means that we must liberate our sex, so that we may see all these women blossoming in the sunshine of freedom in all the diversity of their nature.[74]

The text is quoted only partially, but the colonialist undertone in these few lines cannot be missed. Voilquin makes assumptions and generalisations that Arab women are oppressed mainly because they can see but cannot be seen. They all have the same features but are not generally pretty because as she puts it: '…the pure oval face of a European is not found in any of them.' So Voilquin, having spent two years in Egypt, would have liked to set her own 'civilised' social standards in a country that is not her own, and extends these standards to include physical appearances. The quotation also shows almost the same perplexity and hostility in the way the West perceives the veil today.

Gayatri Spivak warns that Western feminism is as guilty as colonialism of oppressing and speaking for 'Third World' subjects. Spivak's work has been important in challenging Said's claim that the colonial discourse is homogeneous. Her approach differs from Said's and Bhabha's in the way she deconstructs colonial discourse without stressing the coloniser's need for the colonised. As a feminist Marxist deconstructivist, Spivak demands that postcolonial analysis should embody persistent recognition of heterogeneity in respect of the cultures of postcolonialism. Therefore,

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[74] Mabro, 1991: 74-5

one (post)colonised culture does not typify all other (post)colonised ones, which is contrary to Said's claim that the Arab World typifies the Orient. Spivak also notes that differences within the colonising formations must be respected and not regarded as a uniform vision of Western Orientalism. In attempting to register the heterogeneity of postcolonialism, she insists on the importance of gender, which neither both Bhabha and Said addresses.[75]

Spivak suggests that women share with the colonised nations the experience of oppression and repression. When discussing the oppression and the silencing of the female subject, she suggests that this oppression extends to the whole colonial world and results in silencing all natives, men and women. She also points out that the resistance of the subaltern subject is not separated from the dominant discourse that provides him/her with the language in order to constitute his/her identity. In this case, colonial discourse is the language through which the oppressed can find a voice to express his/her identity.

One of the most important contributions that Spivak has made to contemporary feminist thought is her consistent demand that Western feminism should seriously consider the material histories of the lives of 'Third World' women in its accounts of women's struggles against oppression. She challenges universal claims that feminists speak for all women and the assumption that all women are the same. She also emphasises the importance of respecting differences in race, class, religion and culture between women.

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[75] Moore-Gilbert, 1997:75

In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak emphasises that the radical Western intellectual and Western feminists can paradoxically silence the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experiences. Representing the subaltern groups appropriates the voice of the subaltern and thereby silences them. This is also applied to Western feminism's tendency to speak on behalf of 'Third World' women. Spivak describes the position of the 'Third World' woman,

> Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation.[76]

Due to the colonial tone in Western feminist discourse, many Arab women internalized their goals of liberation in a context that does not match the goal of women's movements in the West. Those women seek to retain the communal extended family aspects of traditional society while eliminating its worse abuses.[77] Having colonial resistance in mind, 'Third World' feminist theory has the task of working on the restoration of tradition combined with a critique of social and cultural institutions.

Karam, having conducted interviews with many Arab women from different backgrounds and experiences, concludes that Egyptian feminism, which can be used as a reference to Arab feminism as a whole, is classified into three major groups. First, there is the secular group, which places its activities outside religion and appeals instead to more international concepts such as human rights standards. Second, there is Islamist feminism, which operates directly through religious

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[76] Spivak, 1988: 306
[77] Duval, 1998: 47

teachings and argues that the oppression of women stems from their attempts to trespass on the territory of men. They argue that a just society is a one that promotes recognition and compatibility between the two sexes rather than promoting competition between them. Between the former two groups lies the third one, which Karam calls Muslim feminism. This group reads the Qur'an and the Sunna from a feminine perspective with the intention of demonstrating that the notion of equality between the two sexes, far from being incompatible with Islam, is contained within its doctrines. They, unlike Islamist feminists, do not see the readings of religious texts as part of a wider religious project and they do not desire for structural changes in society of the type promoted by Islamists.[78]

In *Women Claim Islam*, Miriam Cooke unapologetically uses the term 'feminism' to refer to Arab women who think and do something about changing expectations for women's social roles and responsibilities. Despite the wide-spread resistance to the term as connoting Western women's activists movements, Cooke suggests that the term 'feminism' should not be 'restricted to a narrow notion of public action' nor should it be judged as a 'culturally specific term.'[79] She explains,

> Feminism is much more than an ideology driving organised political movements. It is, above all, an epistemology. It is an attitude, a frame of mind that highlights the role of gender in understanding the organisation of society. Feminism provides analytical tools for assessing how expectations for men's and women's behaviour have led to unjust situations, particularly but not necessarily only for women. Feminism seeks justice wherever it can find it. Feminism involves political and intellectual awareness of gender discrimination, a rejection of behaviours furthering such discrimination, and the advocacy of activists projects to end discrimination and to open opportunities for women to participate in public life.[80]

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[78] See Karam, 1998
[79] Cooke, 2001: ix
[80] ibid: ix-x

Cooke notes that some Arab women join religious groups despite their gender conservatism. Other women choose to fight these groups as they fear the risky interference between Islam and politics. Despite their different approach, both groups fight for a better life. Cooke calls Muslim women who offer a critique of some aspect of Islamic history on behalf of all Muslim women for the purpose of enjoying, with men, full agency in a just community 'Islamic Feminists' although this full agency is not entirely essential to Islamic doctrines.[81]

Cooke points out that Islamic Feminists such as Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El-Saadawi 'take the advantage of the transnationalism of Islam to empower themselves as women and as Muslims. She notes that, 'from their multiple situations they are critiquing the global, local, and domestic institutions that they consider damaging to them as women, as Muslims, and as citizens of their countries and of the world, while remaining wary of outsiders' desires to co-opt their struggle.'[82]

Islamic Feminists, according to Cooke, have a difficult double commitment. On the one hand, they are committed to a faith position, and on the other to women's rights. They refuse the boundaries others try to draw around them and claim that Islam is not necessarily more violent or patriarchal than any other religion. However, other scholars argue that Islam and feminism are not compatible and they should not and could not be associated together. In *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Haidah Moghissi claims that Islam is 'a religion that is based on gender hierarchy,'[83] and suggests that the 'Sharia is not compatible with the principles of equality of human

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[81] ibid: 61
[82] ibid: 61
[83] Moghissi, 1999: 126

rights.'[84] She claims that those who advocate the utility of Islamic feminism are not women from within Muslim communities, but rather they are diasporic feminist academics living in the West. Cooke, in disagreement, notes that Moghissi's major problem is that she considers divine laws inherently against feminism. She also, Cooke notes, 'confounds Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, as though the two were the same.'[85]

Arab women have been represented as victims of religion and traditions in colonialist discourse. Soraya Duval notes, 'Islam is viewed as the main origin of the prevalence of sexual inequality in the Middle East.'[86] Socio-religious values have been regarded as barriers for Muslim women and Muslim society to become civilised. Duval explains,

> In the Western eyes only by giving up these peculiar and intrinsic practices, would Muslim societies move forward on the path of civilisation. The veil, for the colonisers but also in the vision of contemporary Western political culture is the most visible marker of the otherness and inferiority of Islamic societies.[87]

The veil for many contemporary Arab writers has become a metaphor for political illusiveness and resistance of 'Western contaminated values.' For example, the Sudanese novelist Leila Aboulela, among others, believes that 'the 'hijab' has made women able to do more rather than less, because it allows them to be taken seriously, unlike women in the West, who are reduced to 'crumpets' by men.'[88]

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[84] ibid: 141
[85] Cooke, 2001: 58
[86] Duval, 1998: 46
[87] ibid: 48
[88] 'Up Close & Personal: portrait of a Writer-Estrangement of Exile.' Online, Oct. 2002

Resistance for many Arab women means to resist Western misconceptions of Islam before resisting patriarchal authority that dominates their societies. For others, resisting colonial discourse and patriarchal domination go together. Many have chosen to return to religious values rather than adopt Western modernity. They claim that women's liberation is inherent within Islamic doctrines. Women's act of writing indicates resistance and subversion in an attempt to escape their marginalisation.

But when addressing the West, does the Arab/Muslim woman accept her culture's reactionary norms? Or does she appropriate and/or subvert them? This research attempts to find out whether the Arab woman emerges as a subject of her own discourse and, if so, how is her subjectivity expressed? The question of identity as it appears in fiction is crucial. Since identities of women writers and characters are gendered identities, feminism is a necessary tool in writing. It asserts that finding a voice, and more importantly, being heard, is essential for the development of a woman's autonomous identity. In most texts written by Arab women or men, no matter to which feminist group they belong if they do at all, women are represented as problematic figures who try constantly to bridge some kind of a gap between traditional, socio-cultural expectations and modernity. In postcolonial literature, the gap is widened to include the politics of two very different cultures: East and West.

These narratives being written in English represent an attempt by a 'Third World' subject to produce a work of literature in the language of the coloniser. This fact in itself is very telling as it represents a disjunction between the sentiments of the colonised and the language of expression. The language of literature is not merely a medium or a transparent tool of expression; it transforms the subjectivity of the

colonised subject from a 'local' experience to an 'alien' one. Therefore, the coloniser injects local and cultural references into the modes, tropes, discourses and experiences of the foreign language in order to minimise this alienation. This literature reflects a certain political knowledge of the reality of power relations between East and West and gender oppression. In the current political climate, Anglophone literature written by Arab writers offers a chance to explore and connect with the Arab culture, and to discover the histories and experiences of these countries.

Mills suggests that rather than seeing texts written by women as evidence of women's oppression, one can see them, amongst other things, as indicators of women's resistance. She states that 'it is possible for women to write in seemingly compliant ways yet still be making powerful strategic interventions in their own self-presentation and in their interaction with others.'[89]

In *Women Writers in Francophone Africa*, Nicki Hitchcott claims that the criteria of what is regarded as 'good' women's literature are usually constructed by the existing power structures, which are mainly patriarchy and colonialism. Therefore, it is almost impossible for the oppressed to produce good literature that colludes with the oppressor. Arab women writers construct their literature with defiance to both colonial and patriarchal dominance in their societies.[90]

As a result, a daring feminist drive has become central to postcolonial politics and feminist literature. The female body is a site for scars, taboos and joy. It is the centre of attention and a register of symbols within which history is regained and freed from

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[89] Mills, 1997: 85
[90] Hitchcott, 2002: 2

its colonial and patriarchal authority. In *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel*, Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi notes,

> A nexus for inscription for every sort (social, political, ethnic, gendered and racial), the female body is a centre of attention, a register of symbols, and a terrain for the gaze, containment, and also a frightening presence that recalls and provokes, in certain religions, temptations and sins. Female body referentiality is not the monopoly of specific cultures, for it is manipulated for a purpose and circumstance. Certain cultures treat the body with longing, love and respect, albeit with awe at times. In Arab traditions there are treaties for the purpose, though the widely circulated ones, as passed over in compendiums and records, come largely from the empowered male perspective. Women's own comments on their bodies and qualifications are usually enframed in these male narratives, to offer contesting views in certain periods of affluence…[91]

In his book, Al-Musawi offers a contextual analysis of Arabic novels that manifests awareness of Arab life and culture. He analyses a large corpus of contemporary narrative to present a broad view of Arab culture in order to make sense of its present concerns, variety, traditions and roots in their postcolonial formations. Al-Musawi offers a wide and diverse range of mostly translated Arabic novels suggesting that the language used in postcolonial narratives does not necessarily have to be the language of the coloniser. He suggests that although language concerns relate to the colonial question, classical Arabic was used in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century 'as the most worthy weapon against colonialism.'[92] The use of Arabic language undermines and attacks the colonial agenda of wiping out the Arabic language and identity. The Arabic novel runs against subordination to hegemony, and questions authority in its colonial, postcolonial and native formations. It challenges

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[91] Al-Musawi, 2003: 203
[92] ibid: 10, See also Suleiman, 2004

the West especially with encounters between the self and the other, which is significantly postcolonial.

Al-Musawi, in his wide variety of analysis, does not ignore the image of the Arab female. He suggests that her image is central to encounters between East and West. He shows that there is a distinctive feminist narrative in contemporary Arabic fiction. Women writers are eager to uncover the damage done to them due to social, political and traditional ways of thinking. They also tend to offer enough space for their female protagonists to enforce their will and discourse against patriarchal domination.

The marginalisation of women and their subordination has been a recurrent theme that still dominates the literatures of post-independence Arab countries. In this research, I narrow the frame of analysis to the literary works of Arab female Anglophone writers to shed light on various sub-themes that have emerged in their representation of Arab women. This is of special importance since the target audience is predominately Western. Since major steps in Oriental scholarship were first taken either in Britain and/or France, these novels are significant as they present another representation and portray another image of the Arab woman and culture. They are analysed as texts that resist or perpetuate the Oriental scholarship and the process of stereotyping Arab women. They can also be considered in relation to the social and political reality of the Arab World, and read as a source of important images of national identity. I attempt to demonstrate how such representations can be reconciliatory as in the work of Leila Aboulela, ambivalent as evidenced by the work of Zeina Ghandour or counteractive as demonstrated by the novels of Ahdaf Soueif.

The analysis will be concerned with power relations and ways women, as individuals and as members of communities, negotiate these relations. The analysis of the chosen novels shall attempt to focus on Arab women as an oppressed group, analysing power as it manifests itself in the narratives and as it is resisted in everyday life. Through this analysis I shall attempt to demonstrate that this kind of fiction is not divorced from its social and political context, and rather than looking for evidence of women's oppression in these narratives, they should be seen as indicators of women's resistance to oppression.

The medium language chosen is significant as English language is encoded with the ideology of power and dominance. This research focuses on the themes and values represented to the West through using the language of the dominant. Although written in English, the Signifier and the Signified portrayed in these 'English' novels are particular to a certain context and setting: the Arab World and the Arab woman. This research, however, does not focus on why these Arab women write in English as it seems a natural choice since most of these writers received their education in English.

What the selected novelists have in common, besides the Arabic culture and writing in English, is their underlying political and cultural awareness of the need to be agents of change. Whether the agenda behind writing is agreement or disagreement with ruling traditions and patriarchal dominance, they all have a vision to portray and a message to convey to the Western reader concerning themselves, as women, and their cultural backgrounds.

Through employing a discursive analytical approach, I seek to shed light on the affiliation between Western reality and systems of knowledge in relation to Arabs/Muslims in general and Arab/Muslim women in particular. I also shed light on the attempts by Anglophone female writers to displace, resist, rupture or perpetuate such frames of knowledge on the other. The latter forms of constituted knowledge determine the dynamics and nature of power relations that exist between Arab men and Arab women, Arab men/women and their Western audience, Arab men and Western women, and finally Arab women and Western men

To limit the scope of my analysis, I have chosen the literature that is related to the Anglo-Arab/Islamic experience as opposed to American or French. This is partly because of my limited knowledge of French, and partly because there will be virtually no limit to the material I would have to cover. Translated works have not been included as the focus of this research is on writing aimed at the Western audience. This is also due to the fact that many scholars have already dealt with translated works by Arab women writers.

This study attempts to bring a major corpus of work to the attention of the English speaking public, to whom it may still not be entirely familiar. The literature chosen, although highly acclaimed, is ignored by most critics. Chapter one discusses Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* focusing on sexual desire. I examine prevailing attitudes of Western and Eastern men towards Arab women and cultural stereotyping. I point out that sexual politics is significant to the repression of emotions, the subjugation of women and draws an alarming analogy between colonialism and patriarchy. Soueif deals with crucial patterns in migration/exile, and colonial/anti-

colonial/neo-colonial/postcolonial transitions. The narrative moves between the political and the personal suggesting that the emancipation of women is parallel to political autonomy, which is an idea that is not shared by many Arab writers including Soueif herself in her second novel *The Map of Love*.

Chapter two examines Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, which focuses on reconciliation between Islam and the West. Islamic religion is the main focus of this novel, and portrays a relationship between an Arab woman and a British man in an attempt to reconcile both divisions in the middle of the current political predicament. The author focuses on the veil and other religious codes to reveal the centrality of religion in politics. The female subject is portrayed as a tool for both reconciliation and cultural authenticity. It utilises Arab women's victimisation by patriarchal laws in order to promote cultural authenticity. I demonstrate in this chapter that while the novel manifests a desire for political change, the context in which Arab women live is considered an inherent part of Qur'anic requirements for the sake of modesty and piety of women who represent the nation.

Chapter three turns to nationalism in Egypt and the Egyptians' struggle for independence through another narrative written by Soueif. Soueif's second novel, *The Map of Love,* focuses on reconciliation between East and West through recovering history. It juxtaposes historical and political events of the late nineteenth century with events of the late twentieth century in order to highlight major political events and the role of history in the reconciliation process. Romance and love affairs are also part of this narrative although the situation is a reverse of the first two novels analysed. The narrative highlights the relationship between Arab men and Western women as part of

the reconciliatory dialogue. More importantly, it draws the Western reader's attention to the reality of colonialism in Egypt and to several cultural and social behaviours. Soueif employs a Western woman to overturn misrepresentations and misunderstandings of Arab culture, politics and religion. This seems to be a conscious decision on behalf of the novelist as it brings the Western reader closer to the reality that the narrative portrays. The British protagonist, Anna, explains to the reader several cultural values focusing mainly on women's issues especially the veil, which continues to be a paradoxical and highly emotive subject of debate.

Chapter four examines *The Honey* by Zeina Ghandour as a mystical novel that explores the multifaceted meanings of religious, national and patriarchal discourses under which both Arab women and men live. The novel challenges dichotomies of power relations between male/female and oppressor/oppressed on political, sexual and mystical levels. It denies that gender roles in their present image are Islamic and stresses on patriarchy as the source of oppression in the Arab World. The novel warns against misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Islam and calls for the emancipation of the whole society from rigid dogmas in order to preserve peace. I discuss the veil in this chapter from the Arab woman's point of view as *The Honey* offers a mystical interpretation of this phenomenon. In order to get a diverse view on this subject and the politics surrounding it, I analyse the veil as portrayed in another two novels: *The Translator* and *The Holy Woman,* demonstrating that the veil is not only a sign of modesty and piety, but can be a cultural and a political protest.

This research seeks to elucidate the connection between British colonialism and imperialism with patriarchal domination in the Arab World. I examine Western

authority and patriarchal authority practiced on Arab women as demonstrated in the chosen texts. I identify the problems these novelists reveal to the Western audience and how they locate themselves through the narrative vis-à-vis the West. I also attempt to explain how patriarchal authority borrowed colonialist theses to rule women and culture.

This research, however, does not attempt to reveal the 'truth' behind the Arab woman since this truth is multiple and difficult to grasp. Rather I focus on the ways the Arab woman has represented herself, and the cultures of her experience to the West. It is also important to clarify here that binary oppositions of Eastern/Arab man versus Western man are adopted for the sake of the argument since it seems to be the basis of dichotomies in the novels.

My own experience, as an Arab woman living in Jordan and in Britain, is in part what made me interested in this research.[93] The web of gender oppression, racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism and Islamophobia has made the lives of Arabs, and Arab women in particular, highly political. Although it is very difficult, I tried to detach myself from this research as much as possible. I am certain, however, that on many occasions I fall prey to either cultural relativism or cultural imperialism, as I found it difficult to avoid either pitfall completely. This research, however, has taught me many things about my own culture that I was not aware of. More importantly, it has expanded an aspect of my own identity that I had never really questioned.

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[93] I would also like to thank my supervisor Prof. Yasir Suleiman for suggesting this topic and for assisting and directing me in choosing the novels analysed in this research.

Chapter Two

Sexual Desire in the Works of Ahdaf Soueif

Paradigms of regulatory power between East and West, thus, converged upon the docile body of the female. In other words, the female metamorphosed into a field of struggle between a local man who was intent on guarding his national identity and foreigner/coloniser conspiring to conquer and divest him off such identity by 'emancipating' the female body and 'redeeming' her status.[94]

2.1 Introduction

In the above quotation, Al-Mahadin summarises succinctly the status of women as dynamic fields of struggle in East/West relations during wars of independence and national efforts at constructing discourses of national liberation. Women figure highly in representations that animated national imagination, a prerequisite in the process of forming an identity that would best pull together all forces of resistance. Women become the signifier and have been invested with a wide array of national symbols, customs, traditions and most importantly, religious meaning. As struggles for independence gained momentum, colonial discourse adopted a set of practices which appeared to have the explicit aim of liberating Arab women from the dark, 'uncivilised' and 'backward' forces of the locale. On a deeper level, it was a strategy adopted to change the signified of that national Signifier.[95]

In the Eye of the Sun is an attempt by an Egyptian female writer to position herself in the culture of the coloniser through adopting his/her language as a medium of communication. The linguistic signs are once again subjected to the ambivalence of

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[94] Al-Mahadin, 2004: 25

[95] See Al-Mahadin, 2004, Loomba, 2000 (1998), Abu-Lughod, 1998, Ahmad, 1992, and Duval, 1998

the unstable signified. The signifier is ostensibly colonial and the signified is undeniably that of the colonised.

The novel investigates the possibilities of a cultural dialogue in the form of 'desire.' The discourse of sexual politics, in general, has had a definitive role in the production of stereotypes of Arab women, engendering their oppression at the hands of both coloniser and colonised, where in the latter case it has served as the main pillar of patriarchal domination and, in the former, it occupied a central position in colonial discourse. Ahdaf Soueif, thus, places the desire of that protagonist between cultures in the context of politics, history, and geography, which cannot be separated from each other.[96]

In the Eye of the Sun is a representation of the socially constructed discourse of sexuality in Arab societies. Social conventions have created discursive structures around sexual pleasure making sexuality omnipresent although difficult to discuss. How to discuss sexuality is also socially constructed. In the Arab world, sexuality is discussed mainly in the form of marriage, pro-creation or in medical contexts. As a form of pleasure, however, sexuality should remain 'not spoken of explicitly' as a way to maintain its power. The novel overthrows these ideas to expound on the sexuality of Arab women in a very bold narrative line which seeks to delineate and expose the repressive and constructivist power of patriarchal domination.

This chapter focuses on the examination of gender and sexual politics as portrayed in Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, as an encounter between East and West, and as

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[96] Massad, 1999: 74

a knowledge that determines the dynamics and nature of power between Arab women and Arab men, and Arab women and Western men . I would like to point out at the outset that any reference to Islam in this chapter is merely from a sociological rather than theological point of view unless stated otherwise.

2.2 Cultural and Sexual Politics

In the Eye of the Sun is a cross-cultural novel between Britain and Egypt. It challenges various patriarchal structures in the Arab World, and particularly Egypt. The novel presents an array of characters; the liberal Arabs, the conservative and the westernised. It adopts a feminist perspective to negotiate the search for womanhood in the middle of traditions, religion, patriarchy and colonialism/imperialism. In her work, Ahdaf Soueif discusses women's desires unreservedly to promote social and political change. She writes a piece of literature on the inner thoughts of a woman, an Arab woman who feels prohibited to articulate or act upon her feelings and desires.

Asya, the protagonist, is a complex hybrid character. Her parents are academics and she is educated in Egypt and Britain. The novel starts in London in 1979 with Asya caring for her Uncle Hamid who suffers from cancer. While she looks after her uncle she remembers the times when he used to look after her as a child. She remembers the events of 1967 in particular that ended with mainly the Arab's defeat and the occupation of Sinai. It was the year that marked many changes on the national and the familial levels as it caused puzzlement and despair of ordinary Egyptians who were led by Nasser to believe that Egypt was winning the war but were told later that they were defeated immensely. Hamid has a car accident that changes his life and the 1967 war starts and changes Egyptians' lives.

In the Eye of the Sun is a multi-layered novel. Soueif shows an exemplary awareness of the important political events that shaped the history of the region from 1967 until 1979 and accurately captures her generation's reactions to them. She also presents plausible images of Arab women held back or mostly unaware of the reality of oppression and manipulation brought about by the contexts in which they exist. The novel touches upon the dilemmas of Arabs caught between two worlds, East and West.

The novel's main focus is Asya's emotional life and her search for an identity while living in both Egypt and Britain. The narrative also documents the emotional and political life of Egypt and the Arab world. It narrates political events that although seem to interrupt the flow of the narrative, they constitute an integral part of Asya's identity and her generation's. Political events show Egypt's chaotic political situation and reflect on the social formation of society.

The narrative gives a sense of continuity in national and family life. It gives political events a parallel structure with the domestic life of the characters. Soueif uses two techniques in an attempt to juxtapose and integrate the personal and the political elements in the novel. The first is through the interruption of the fictional elements to state political events in the form of chunks. For example,

> '7.30 a.m.
> Israeli troops attack and occupy Um Bassis in the Sinai. No news of this first blow reaches headquarters.
> 8 a.m.
> The leadership of the front congregates at Bir Timada Airport in the Sinai.'[97]

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[97] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 49

This technique is used throughout the novel to narrate events from 1967 until Nasser's death in 1970 which marked the start of a new era and a new generation in Egypt. Soueif's second technique of narrating political events is through her characters. Characters engage in debates around the political situation of their time ,mainly Egypt's relationship with Israel and Jamal Abd el-Nasser's efforts to liberate occupied lands during the 1967 war and his efforts to join the Arab nations together in an attempt to liberate the lands occupied by Israel. For example, in a conversation between Asya and her uncle Hamid, he says,

> 'Your generation was brought up on 'Abd el-Nasser's speeches; on 'Non-Alignment' and 'Socialism' –'
> 'Yes,' Asya agrees. 'And 'Arab Unity' and 'The Palestinian Cause' –'
> 'So they find it difficult to accept the open-door economic policy and begging for US AID and bilateral peace with Israel – '
> 'The worst thing,' says Asya, 'is this terrible rift between us and the rest of the Arab world.'[98]

The narrative reveals people's reaction to the devastating defeat of the 1967 war, Abd el-Nasser's death, Sadat's era, the 70s crisis between Palestinians and Jordanians, the Lebanese civil war and many more events up until 1979. It reveals that political aspect is an integral component of the cultural, the social and the personal aspects of a nation.

The narrative is also a cultural dialogue between East and West. *In the Eye of the Sun* is a hybrid text on a cultural and a linguistic level. The novelist does not concentrate on Arabs only and their point of view, but also extends her thoughts and

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[98] ibid: 17-8. During Nasser's era the US withdrew its financial aid offers to Egypt. Egypt adopted a new foreign policy of non-alignment and decided to recognise Communist China and exchange diplomatic relations with her. This caused a rift between Egypt which was given aid by China and the Soviet Union and other Arab countries which were offered aid by the US.

consciousness to the Western world. For example, in a debate between Asya and a British character, the latter asks,

> '...Why do they [Israelis] carry on bombing Lebanon?'
> 'Because that is where the terrorists are. Do you approve of terrorism?'
> 'No, I don't. But terrorism wasn't invented by the Palestinians. The Israelis themselves used it long ago: in Deir Yassin for example, and nobody's dragging their elder statesmen up – people who were involved in the Stern and Irgun-in front of a court – '[99]

The main characters are caught up in the middle of two worlds: the Arab and the Western. On a linguistic level, although the language used is English, Soueif uses Arabic expressions, proverbs and words. She combines the two languages, cultures, and traditions demonstrating that the transaction between cultures is not a one-way process. Soueif gives an accurate picture of weddings, funerals, family, social affairs, war and politics in Egypt. Through this, she allows for new formations to arise from conflicts between cultures, which would allow terminating binary categories of the past and developing new models of cultural exchange and growth.

Perhaps the classic example of linguistic and cultural dialogues in the narrative is when Asya tries to translate al-Shaykh Imam's 'Sharraft Ya Nixon Baba' to an English speaking audience.[100] When Asya plays the tape she is asked to translate the song to those who do not understand Arabic. She translates the first line as,

> 'You've honoured us, Nixon Baba – 'Baba' means 'father' but it is also used here, as a title of mock respect – as in 'Ali Baba,' for example – that's probably derived from Muslim Indian use of Arabic – but the thing is you could also address a child as 'Baba' as an endearment – a sort of inversion: like calling him Big Chief

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[99] ibid: 184
[100] Sheikh Imam is an elderly blind man and a protest singer banned by the government.

> because he's so little – and so when it's used aggressively - say in an argument between two men - it carries a diminutivising, belittling signification. So here it holds all these meanings. Anyway, 'you've honoured us, Nixon Baba' – 'You've honoured us' is, by the way, the traditional greeting with which you meet someone coming into your home – its almost like 'come on in' in this country. So it functions merely as a greeting and he uses it in that way but of course he activates – ironically – the meaning of having actually 'honoured' us.'[101]

Asya feels that she has to fully elaborate on the meaning of one word in order to clarify the cultural meanings that it carries. She tries to represent the feelings expressed in the Arabic language in order to represent them comprehensibly to the other culture. Had she only mentioned the direct meaning of the word 'Baba', which is father, the irony and the exact meaning of the sentence would be lost. This shows the difficulty of cultural dialogues when relying only on linguistic translation. The narrative also includes icons in Egyptian culture such as the singer Umm Kulthum along with Western rock music, Egyptian and Western film actors and involves the reader with technical aspects of Asya's dissertation in Linguistics.

The narrative expresses Arab thoughts in English words. Edward Said writes,

> Is *In the of the Sun* an Arabic novel in English? Yes, and not just because the heroine, her family, friends, and background are Arab. Throughout its subtly illuminated portrait of Asya, Soueif accomplishes the feat of refining a style that is totally amphibious, that is, not felt as the dutiful English translation of an Arabic original, but unmistakably authentic, stubborn, idiomatic, and yes Arab. By turns ornate, telegraphic, allusive, almost comically fluent, barbarous, painful, lyrical, awkward, and swift, this English is reducible only to Asya, who is decidedly not a symbol or allegory of the Arab woman, but a fully realised, if impossibly situated, Egyptian sensibility in, but not totally of, the West. [102]

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[101] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 496-7
[102] Said, 2000: 409

The novel reaches its powerful point when Soueif slowly explores Asya's limited life as an Arab woman overwhelmed by her oppressive husband Saif and repulsive English lover Gerald Stone. Through Asya's life Soueif negotiates different levels of desire; the encounter between East and West, Arabic and English, and women and men in an intercultural context. In 'The Politics of Desire in the Writings of Ahdaf Soueif,' Joseph Massad writes,

> Soueif's aim is to cut through the confusion and stereotypes of society; the dissimulation of international, national, and family politics; the secure matrix through which life and its desires are defined. The journey of her characters is one where liberation is the necessary telos, but rather the complex process through which the unfolding desire(s) – sexual, social, economic, and political - is shaped by the characters themselves and all that surrounds them. It is this complicated picture that is painted by Ahdaf Soueif's brush.[103]

Political events reveal power relations between nations and governments and the personal in the novel reveals power relations that exist in class divisions and gender relations. Soueif shows that sexual domain has the most pervasive ideology of cultures and provides its fundamental concepts of power. Female inferiority is ascribed to her physical weakness and/or intellectual inferiority. Even in national matters, women are viewed and view themselves to be restricted to their homes while national affairs are men's responsibility. One woman, the wife of a greengrocer in the novel, says, 'If I were a man. If only I were a man. You wouldn't see me here today. By the grave of my mother I'd be at the Canal if I had to get there on foot.'[104] This woman is held back and cannot fight for the national cause believing that fighting for national independence is the male's role. The novel, however, shows that men who might have the same national feelings are sitting still. The narrator continues, 'Her

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[103] Massad, 1999: 75

[104] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 54

husband, the greengrocer, sits in his usual dim corner by the okra, spaced out, his hashish-filled cigarette in his hand.' [105]

Sexual desire in *In the Eye of the Sun* revolves around the ambivalence surrounding power relations between East and West and between women and men within the same society. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon elaborates on the interplay between the black colonised's hatred for the coloniser and the desire to be like him through the possession of a white female. The Eastern man feels that he has to prove his 'manhood' through sexual competition with the white man who in turn fears this rivalry.[106] This is explained in terms of the inferiority that the Eastern subject feels towards the West. It is also explained in terms of the coloniser's desire of the colonised woman because the latter help him assert his subjectivity. In other words, the Western needs the Eastern because the latter represents everything the Western is not. Both East and West go through this process of ambivalence where they resent and yet desire each other for different reasons.[107]

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault demonstrates how sexuality as opposed to sex is problematised by social practices to ensure the production of acceptable norms of sexual behaviour. It is traditionally believed, as Foucault argues, that the Victorian age oppressed sexuality. He argues that there has never been an age where sexuality was discussed as the Victorian one thus indicating that there are indirect methods to produce and repress sexuality through multiple discourses. Subjects are produced and suppressed by the same institutions. Sexuality is produced in a certain way so as to control it. Descriptive, prescriptive and performative practices act upon

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[105] ibid: 54
[106] See Fanon, 1967
[107] See Bhabha, 1994

the body of the subject to produce and engender his/her sexuality in relation to himself/herself and others. Thus, there is a need to examine more closely the diverse power relations that exist around the discourse of sexuality that leads it to manifest itself in the way it does. Power relations are dynamic and omnipresent, but constantly changing. The interrelation between them and the varying discourses on sexuality largely determines how sexuality is perceived.[108] Graciela Hierro, in 'Gender and Power,' argues that,

> It is not men or sex that shapes the structure of society but the configuration of power: hierarchal or participatory...The feminine and the masculine can be understood by means of natural dichotomies: the feminine experience is necessarily linked to nature and immanence due to procreation and the presence of vital cycles; the masculine experience is characterised by control and transcendence. To give life is the function of women: to regulate life is the function of men. All of this constitutes the poles of signification of genders.[109]

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argues that sexual politics is ideological. It is based on power-structured relationships and/or arrangements whereby one group of people is controlled by another. She defines sexual politics as the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate one. She notes that this ideology obtains consent through 'socialisation' of both sexes to basic patriarchal polities with regard to temperament, role and status.

Temperament, Millett argues, involves the formation of human personality along with stereotyped lines of sex category (masculine and feminine). This is based on the needs and values of the dominated group. It is dictated by what its members appreciate in themselves and find fitting in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force and

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[108] See Foucault, 1998 (1976)
[109] Hierro, 1994: 175

efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue' and incompetence in the female.[110]

Millett also approaches sexual difference from a sociological angle, in the sense that social structures especially those of the family maintain the fundamental mechanism of social politics. Millet stresses that female and male are two cultures and their life experiences are different. The relation of dominance and subordination is determined by birthright priority. Sex role and social circumstances force a highly elaborated code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex, with status following the obligations assigned for each sex.[111]

Soueif demonstrates the sociological angel of sexual politics in the narrative. She reveals various social constructions that are dominant in Egyptian society and play a significant role in social formations. On many occasions she elaborates on the birthright superiority of the male and how it determines gender relations in society through forcing codes of conduct and assigning obligations for each sex. The narrator says, 'Every night a woman should ask her husband three times if he wants anything. And only then can she fall asleep with an easy conscience.'[112] The narrative demonstrates that roles assigned to women are that of obedience, docility, passivity and dependency on the male figure in the family. Women are also thought to be passive and usually linked to negative connotations. For example the narrator says,

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[110] Millet, 1997: 26
[111] ibid: 26
[112] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 91

'Illnesses, marriages, deaths, these are all for women,'[113] and one male character, Ismail Mursi, 'wept out loud like a woman.'[114]

The narrative also reveals the hypocrisy in these social standards. Society ascribes for women different roles from the ones men ascribe for themselves. Women are maintained and dominated by patriarchal values which on many occasions seem hypocritical as they are not practiced by men. Asya's friend, Chrissie, was seen by her brother talking to a male university colleague on the street. The brother gets furious and tells their father who in turn beats up his daughter. Just a few pages earlier, the reader learns that Taha, the brother, is tormented by his love to a Copt girl whose parents disapprove of him because of different religious beliefs. While Taha is encouraged to marry the Copt girl, Chrissie, according to her brother and father, jeopardised the family's reputation and should be punished by leaving university and staying at home until she marries. Taha says,

> 'Don't you understand, Mother? I saw her with a man. *My sister*. Walking in the street with a man.'[115]

Chrissie's father says,

> 'You've forgotten whose daughter you are? Forgotten who your grandparents were? You would shame me in front of people? You would drag the Tarabulsi name in the mud?'[116]

Patriarchal socio-cultural factors, internal economic structures and political systems are component elements of male-centred institutions that impede gender equality. The male's superior economic position implies that females are often seen as sexual objects. A large quantity of guilt attached to sexuality is placed upon females who are

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[113] ibid: 68
[114] ibid: 67
[115] ibid: 113
[116] ibid: 121

blamed for any sexual liaison. Millett observes that women's sexual functions are felt to be impure worldwide and one sees evidence of it everywhere in literature, in myth, in primitive and civilised life.[117] Because of such feelings and attitudes some women believe that they are prisoners of a persistent structure of power, and that all reform movements usually end up by serving these structures in new and subtle ways. Thus, any form of resistance women tend to take is seen to be personal and private; one that does not usually promote any kind of legal or institutional change.

Ahdaf Soueif keeps moving between Egypt and England in her life and her writing, but her main concerns are with her native country. One of these concerns is the condition of Arab women, which she interrogates frankly due to publishing her works in a country where sexual frankness is the norm unlike the Arab World where censorship prevails. This frankness caused many to attack her and her writings suggesting that what she writes is immoral and offensive to Arab women. In an interview with Saideh Pakravan, Soueif quotes a letter that appeared in a paper on *In the Eye of the Sun*,

> I am an Egyptian woman living in the Gulf. I was forced to read several pages of Soueif's novel. I have gone into deep trauma. I cannot understand how this woman, who has divested herself of every trace of feminine modesty, could commit this act which defames her sisters, defames Arab women, and defames Islam. I can only conclude that she is part of a Zionist conspiracy.[118]

Perhaps the last few words are the most interesting part of this quotation. They demonstrate the inter-relation between women, their modesty and politics. If a woman writer demonstrates frankness then she is a collaborator with the enemy. Soueif in the narrative does not defame Islam rather she simply portrays an emotional journey of an

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[117] ibid: 47
[118] Quoted in Pakravan, 1995: 282

Arab woman lost between Britain and Egypt. In fact, at the end of this emotional journey, Asya returns to her Muslim country. Edward Said writes,

> Soueif renders the experience of crossing over from one side to another, and then back again, indefinitely, without rancor or preachness. Because Asya is so securely Arab and Muslim, she does not need to make an issue of it. The fine thing, though, is that Soueif can present such a hegira as Asya's in English, thereby showing that what has become almost formulaic to the Arab (as well as Western) discourse of the Other need not always be the case.[119]

The novelist also gives Palestine a very important place in her writings in many different ways. Growing up in Nasser's era, both Asya and Soueif witnessed Palestine's central place in the national project. The Palestinian character Bassam in *In the Eye of the Sun* demonstrates this centrality and shows the injustices that are practiced against Palestinians in the Arab World and outside it. When Asya tells Chrissie's mother about Bassam and his love for Noora she replies in fury,

> 'Palestinian?' Muneera claps her hand to her mouth. 'Palestinian' And he's going and falling in love with Noora al-Manesterli? I swear her father will have him jailed.'
> 'So what does that mean Tante? That Palestinians shouldn't fall in love? Shouldn't – '
> 'They should fall in love, yes, fall in love as much as they want to: with their own people. Among themselves. They shouldn't spread their disasters over other people's daughters. Oh God, God – '[120]

This shows Egyptian and Arab attitudes towards Palestinians. Noora and Bassam got married eventually but without Noora's parents approval. Bassam represents the exiled Palestinian and functions in the novel as a reminder of the Palestinian cause which is at the centre of the relationship between the Arabs and the West.

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[119] Said, 2000: 410
[120] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 115

Considering the narrative as an act to defame Arab women and Islam and then regard it as a Zionist conspiracy for its frankness reveals narrow attitudes towards change which usually result in passivity and pessimism. The narrative reveals that two of the most efficient branches of patriarchy lie in the religious and economic hold over its female subjects. Millett states that religion is the starting point of patriarchy,

> Patriarchy has God on its side. One of the most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality.... patriarchal religion and ethics tend to lump the female and sex together as if the whole burden of the onus and stigma it attaches to sex were the fault of the female alone. Thereby sex, which is known to be unclean, sinful, and debilitating, pertains to the female, and the male identity is preserved as human, rather than a sexual one.[121]

There is no doubt that Islamic religion had a great influence in shaping Arab societies. Islam can be both revolutionary and pacifist depending on the context and the way it is practiced. Nowadays, Islamic practice takes two forms: one that limits human possibilities in the form of patriarchy. The other, which is closer to 'true' Islam, seeks spirituality and equality as one of its aspects. Spirituality, equality and emancipation are one aspect of Islam, neither entirely absent, nor entirely essential to it, however. It is rather difficult to agree or disagree with Millet in the above quotation if one studies early Islamic doctrines. Islam has been the most effective agent of control in the Arab World. Patriarchy, however, was partly created by male misinterpretations of Islam. It remains debatable, however, whether Islam has undermined or improved the status of women. Although Islam liberated women in many ways, there is no doubt that current Islamic practices favour men in many respects. But to suggest that the Arab World

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[121] Millet, 1997: 51-2

suffers from rigid patriarchal dogmas exclusively because of Islam is a form of reductionism. All cultures worldwide, Islamic or not, are to varying degrees patriarchal. Nationalism, which emerged and intensified during the colonisation of Arab lands and especially the occupation of Palestine, entrenched patriarchy. Claims such as 'women are mothers of the nation' or 'preserving private sphere from Western contamination,' positioned women as a field of struggle rather than a partner in it.

The novel portrays religion as the hope for the generations that were brought up after Abd el-Nasser's era. It compares between both eras suggesting that religion in Egypt in the 60s was based on rituals as opposed to an ideology that controlled people's thinking and way of life. But during Sadat's era, people started to practice religion as an ideology in the hope that they will find salvation and redemption from the chaotic world they live in. Nadia, Asya's aunt, tells Asya,

> 'You wouldn't recognise the University now, Asya: half the girls are wearing the *hijab*; a particular angular version of the *hijab* that makes them look like the Sphinx – '
> 'But I don't understand how they can – I mean religion for me and ' Chrissie and everyone was Ramadan and our grandparents praying and things like that – '
> 'It *is* understandable though,' Hamid says. 'people have to have something to hope for.'[122]

In 'Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity,' Amin Malak notes that the fiction of Soueif is an integral part of evolving Arab-feminist discourse and the fact that it is written in English carries with it specific characteristics. He continues,

> The hybridised English that Soueif deploys and produces allows the conscious feminist narrative voice to affiliate taboo terrains, both sexual and political, that might be inaccessible when handled in Arabic. Removed emotionally and culturally from the local scene, the English language accords liberating medium to the author to broach and delve into issues such as feminine

[122] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 17

> sexuality, politics of power and gender, and the disfranchised of the poor: English here is a liberating lexical storehouse and semantic sanctuary.[123]

In the Eye of the Sun challenges traditions and cultural values. Characters exist in various traditional and liberal contexts to reveal the multiplicity of Arab women's experiences. Having said that, it should be noted that the traditional far outweighs the liberal in the daily reality of the Arab world but not in the novel. Asya, the protagonist, does not come across as a 'traditional' Egyptian woman who lives her life according to customs and social restrictions. Since she was at school, she has been defiant and independent in her thoughts and actions. She was brought up in a liberal middle-upper class family, which makes it easier for her to practice freedom of speech if nothing else. Asya falls in love, at a young age, with Saif, an Egyptian man who is eight years her senior. They get married a few years later but cannot consummate their marriage. The novel focuses on how Asya tries to combine love and desire in her relationship with Saif with the political backdrop of the 1967 war up until the 1970s. When they get married and the relationship is shaped by social restrictions, desire is stunted. When Asya travels to England she learns the difference between love and desire. Although she is deeply in love with her husband, they could not or would not consummate their marriage and for Asya this was due to social reasons on one hand, and Saif's indifference to her needs on the other. In England, she ends up fulfilling her sexual desires with Gerald Stone, a British man with whom she is not in love.

When Asya first meets Saif and falls in love with him, he strikes her as culturally very open-minded. He reads Sartre, Fanon, Harold Robins, and *Playboy*. She feels that they are very similar in their curiosity about life and their way of thinking. He is

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[123] Malak, 2000: 161

Egyptian who speaks English and French and appears to be westernised. Asya feels that she has found the man she will look up to, wants to be like and with. But Saif turns out to be very traditional, but not in the typical sense of traditional men who want their wives to stay at home to cook and clean. In fact, he is very supportive of Asya when she goes to Britain to get her PhD, and he wants her to go out to work and be trendy among other things. However, he does not want her to be independent, to share her life with him and share his with her. He wants her to be like a child who accepts what she gets without opening to other aspects in life. Asya is not independent financially. She totally relies on Saif to send her money to her bank account and he dictates where to spend it. This gives him power over her and her body leaving her totally reliant on him. Angela Gilliman in 'Women's equality and national liberation' quotes Sally Mugabe,

> ...there are two issues of power that are central to women, and without which women's equality is impossible: (1) independent access to money or resources that enable women to contribute to their own and their children's livelihood, and (2) control over the reproductive decisions that relate to their bodies.[124]

Like Asya, Saif creates his own fictional world and lives in it. He fashions events that did not happen in reality, like he had a dog when he was a child and he fakes details about his first meeting with Asya. Saif does not try to include Asya in his fictional world which creates distance between them.

This distance affected their relationship and their sexual life. Asya felt distant and rejected by him. In a conversation between Asya and Saif, she says,

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[124] Gilliman, 1991: 192

' – But *you* don't care. You don't care about me one bit as long as I don't bug you. I could drop dead or take a lover or anything and you wouldn't care – '
'You won't drop dead and you won't take a lover.'
'And that's something else you know, is it? Why *should* you assume that you know everything about me? Everything about how I'll react to anything? Particularly given the – given that it isn't something we've ever talked about – '
'You're bloody right we've never talked about it – '
'Well, why *not*? Why do we never talk about *anything*?'
'There are things that decent people don't talk about.'
'She's stared at him. 'This isn't true – I'm not hearing this – since when do you think in this way? This wasn't even the case at my parents' lunch-table, and I thought that was repressive. I thought *that* was repressive. I thought I was walking out to freedom – you read Jean Genet and Strindberg and you tell me there are things decent people don't talk about?'[125]

Asya and Saif's relationship fails because of Saif's indifference to Asya's feelings and Asya's rejection of the social codes assigned to her and her marriage. Asya wishes for a relationship that is marked by love and romance. She tries constantly to fix her relationship with Saif and be involved in his world but she fails. That is when she starts a relationship with Gerald Stone. Gerald appeals to Asya because he is very different from Saif and herself. He is open to different ideas, he talks to her, stays with her all day, and cares about what she thinks. This makes her feel feminine and desired. She could not leave him when she felt frustrated by his crudeness because she is incapable of being rude or horrible to people.

Asya demonstrated that sexuality no matter how much people try to mute it, it is indeed a basic need for all people in all cultures. The exchange of love, tenderness, equal sharing and recognition among people would create a solid and more secure basis for change in other aspects of life that are characterised by similar understanding of domination such as the political, social, economical and the national. Accad, an

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[125] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 424

Arab writer, appeals to Arab women and men to stop being afraid of a sexual revolution because it will offer national emancipation. Sexuality is a very problematic issue for discussion and yet it causes a lot of vulnerability and frustration. Accad quotes excerpts from one of the participants at a conference in Tunisia which explains vividly how Arab societies regard women and the issue of sexuality. She says, .

> Silence prevails, not only on the topic of the feminine body, but also, more generally, on everything that touches upon intimate relations, which are constantly shifting between dream and reality, between love and hate…Why do my tears fall when my neighbour is beaten up? Why do I feel personally humiliated? The pain she experiences in her life affects me for many reasons. The life of such a woman is like a magnifying glass, which reflects back to me an exaggerated image of my own condition. Obtaining the respect of others is a constant struggle for women. The enslavement of other women sets limits to my own blossoming…But above all, her life reminds me of another woman's suffering, to which I was for a long time a spectator- that of my mother…[126]

Writers, such as the above, who happen to be mainly women, choose to express their voices in other languages (mainly English and French) because they fear their cultures' reaction and abuse. Because these women are afraid of speaking up in their mother language as they worry about their own culture's reaction, therefore, they find refuge in writing in another language and targeting readers from other cultures in an attempt to promote change. This is not to say that the Arabic language thwarted sexual expression as many Arab writers, like Hanan Al-Shaykh, have explored sexuality in Arabic despite the resentment they have faced from the culture. Other writers choose to avoid using the Arabic language due to the Arab culture's conservatisms. But how can they promote change in the Arab World when they are writing in a language foreign to the Arab reader?

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[126] ibid: 240-1

Assia Djebar, who writes in French, confesses, 'The language of the Others, in which I was enveloped from childhood...has adhered to me ever since like the tunic of the Nessus.' Yet Djebar could not renounce French because it helps her escape her own country's fundamentalism that dictates women to be domestic creatures.[127]

> Djebar locates herself in the middle ground, as she feels indebted to French for her own personal liberation, while remaining aware that language's subjugation of the greater community she identifies with, Algeria and, more specifically, Algerian women. An insider without, she oscillates between quasi-gratitude to French, which allowed her to escape the harem, and nostalgic attachment to conversational Arabic, which bonds with her Algerian women...[128]

Many have accused Djebar of indecency for writing about sexual problems during the Algerian struggle for independence. The nationalist intellectuals pointed out that the concerns of Algerian youth were different from those of the French that she was preoccupied with in her novel *La Soif*. Zahia Salhi, however, points out in *Politics, Poetics and the Algerian Novel* that 'the nationalists did not understand that, like their male compatriots who were struggling to liberate their country, the female characters of *La Soif* were also taking part in a revolution as they pursued their quest to discover the femininity of their bodies.'[129]

However, women writing in English or French are aware of these languages' oppressive nature as they carry the discourse of the outside transgressor/coloniser. Thus, their narrative is constructed by the existing power structures, being mainly patriarchy and colonialism. It is therefore almost impossible for the oppressed woman to produce a narrative that colludes with the oppressor whether coloniser or

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[127] Elia, 2002: 184

[128] ibid: 185

[129] Salhi, 1999: 199-200

patriarchy. They use the foreign language as a tool to escape from their culture, but the body of the narrative is Arab in discourse in order to confront the coloniser while at the same time rebelling against patriarchal discourses in their locale. Thereby, the 'alien language' is used as a tool to promote the possibility of change in their culture.

In the Eye of the Sun has not been translated into Arabic and when the novelist was asked if she intends to she says,

> I don't think that the literal translation would do. It would have to be a reworking, almost a rewriting of the book. In whatever language you write, you write against a backdrop of that language, of that culture, of the assumptions of the native speakers, of what has been done before in the literature of that language. Now take the odd problematic passages – the more frank passages – from *In the Eye of the Sun*, and look at them against a Western background. Let's say it might be a little shocking, but not very shocking…Now translate this book into Arabic and you have to look at it against a different background, because it is, in a way, an Arab or Egyptian novel. You would have to judge it on the background of what has been done in the literature and the social context of Arabic….Your readers would possibly not want to continue to read the book.[130]

Soueif tells her interviewer that the novel might shock 2 out of 10 of its Western readers, but if translated into Arabic as is, it will shock 9 out 10 of its Arab readers. Because of cultural differences the novel has to be re-written if translated into Arabic. Many incidents, expressions and words do not agree with Arabic culture. Although it was previously said that the novel is Arabic in thought, the language medium used clashes with many Arabic values and the novel might give a different message to its Arab readers. In fact, the parts that involve Asya's sexual life are mainly the parts which the Arab reader will not find agreeable. This is because Arabic culture does not usually discuss female's sexuality from the perspective Soueif explores.

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[130] Pakravan, 1995: 282

2.2.1 The Struggle for Sexual Autonomy

In our contemporary world, men are almost always valued more than women. Customs, traditions, and social and political institutions subordinate women to men. Graciela Hierro notes that,

> Genders were historically and socially constructed on the basis of sex difference. From then on to distinguish among genders means to rank them. Male-female inequality is not a product of a biological difference but of psychological, social, and political differences. Gender is a system of social hierarchy. It is an inequality of power imposed on sex and constitutes the sexualisation of power.[131]

By choosing to send her female heroines to the heart of the Empire and not the males, Soueif explores women's desires and represents them boldly in order to prove that women, like men, go through identity crises and emotional and sexual conflicts. In this, the novelist resists the notion that Arab women are different from men; they are neither inferior nor superior. Arab women are not supposed to be 'ideal' and 'perfect' according to standards determined by men and male dominant societies. She also demonstrates that societies cannot exclude men in imposing cultural norms and traditions on women in an attempt to idealise the latter. Soueif refers to the hostility against Arab women in the Arab world. In general terms, the Arab world in many respects refuses to see women as educated and productive agents in society and there is a constant desire to humiliate and paralyse them. The novelist reveals webs of power relations which exist in patriarchal cultures. These relations are usually the reason that inhibits women or limits them from exploring their options and desires, which makes them passive, fragile and incapable of affecting change or transformation. Fatima Mernissi claims that this hostility is not so much against women but a war against democracy. Women happened to be targeted because they

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[131] Hierro, 1994: 175

happened to be an easy group to manipulate because they were disorganised and therefore powerless which is a direct result of a long tradition of misogyny.[132]

Asya's name is significant as it has multi-layered meanings. In Arabic, it means the continent Asia. It also means 'the cruel one' or 'a woman full of sorrow.' The character's experiences correspond to these various levels of meaning. This also explains that there are no geographical boundaries for Asya's feelings, experiences and worldview as the events of the novel are situated between Europe and Africa and the name recalls Asia. Asya is also the name of the Pharaoh's childless wife which gives a timeless dimension to Asya's experiences.[133] Soueif creates a dialogue of cultural contact and contention beyond language and geographical borders.[134]

Asya, through her refusal of passivity, rebels against both Western and Eastern boundaries. She seems to be caught between her love for her husband and her rebellious nature, which longs to defy what is imposed on women in the form and content of 'traditions.' She is full of paradoxes, which is not surprising considering that the context in which Arab women live in is paradoxical as well. She belongs to a privileged class, yet supports Marxism. She is a woman with conscience yet married to a man who installs computer systems for the secret service in Syria. She is 'emancipated,' yet so impotent to take a stand against her husband's subjugation. Those different levels in the novel allow the reader to get more insight into issues that affect the Arab region and its peoples because Ahdaf Soueif states them from different and diverse angles. The narrative, however, never descends into the didactic to offer judgments and dispense solutions.

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[132] Mernissi, 1996: vii
[133] Asya, in the novel, is also childless.
[134] See Malak, 2000

Asya undergoes an ongoing exploration of emotional and sexual desire when she travels to England to pursue her doctorate degree. A lot of her desires had already manifested themselves in Egypt but they developed and took their specific form in England where she was given the time and space to shape them. Being subjected to social taboos and restrictions in Egypt, Asya's womanhood was oppressed but liberated in England where she felt that she could finally become a 'woman.' There, she had power over her life even if it was a superficial one. When she finally fulfilled those desires, she pleased no one but herself.

Asya expressed confusion towards social and cultural sanctions surrounding her. This inspired a sense of loss and hesitancy as she attempted to break free from the 'little girl' mould to become a fully-fledged free woman. Arab culture refers to unmarried females regardless of their age as 'girls.' The term refers to child-like modes of behaviour reflecting immaturity and innocence. This term of reference shifts only when they are married indicating that maturity is only accomplished when the female is associated with a husband. Cultural norms suggest that female maturity, which is governed by masculine rules, is accomplished only by the marital status of women, as it indicates the consummation of their sexuality. Females are obligated to be 'girls' when they are still under the protection of their fathers, and then 'women' when they are under the boundaries of their husbands. Thus in both instances of girlhood and womanhood, sexuality is not the domain of the women's desires. In girlhood, it is repressed to protect honour. In womanhood, it is there to serve the husband and attend to his needs. Sexuality is never viewed as a form of pleasure but as a symbol of appreciation, a duty and an obligation towards a husband, which exhibits that

sexuality can be 'activated' according to institutionalised dogmas. Hence, sexuality appears to reinforce the power of inequality between men and women. In this sense power is understood as 'domination.'

As a result of this social system Asya, as a grown up, is portrayed as naïve and childish because the system never allows her to be a grown up woman. She thinks life is a novel, a piece of romantic fiction, and only her involvement with people around her gives a sense of reality. She is a confused soul lost between being a girl and a woman. She keeps stressing that she is a woman because she thinks this recognition would validate her sexual needs. This is the role Asya takes with Saif throughout the novel; she tries to prove to him that she is an adult with needs. Saif perceives her as a child who still needs to be nurtured until she becomes independent. In reality, he wants his wife to stay a child who needs his protection because this feeling gives him a sense of security as well as authority over her.

Asya, being frustrated with her position, expresses her sexual fantasies on many occasions. During a lecture delivered by a 'repulsive' speaker, Asya wonders how his wife could put up with him sexually. She also imagines sacrificing herself by giving her body to her friend's brother, whom she dislikes, because her friend was under his mercy. Asya felt empowered, although disgusted, by this imaginary sacrifice as she felt that she was deceiving the brother for the sake of protecting and saving her friend from his evil grip. She travels to Italy and explores sexual desires there while she is in love with Saif because she is curious to know why it is so forbidden. Although pre-marital sex is a taboo in Asya's culture and a sin according to her religion, she asks of Saif to make love to her before marriage. The idea of

being sinful appeals to her and gives her power over social restrictions. She yearns to rebel and explore the taboo terrain in her culture. In Beirut, Saif refers to her as

> 'Ma'm'selle'. 'Asya glances at Saif. So it's 'Ma'm'selle'. Well, that suits her better. It's great to be sinful. Sinful in Beirut!'[135]

The narrator mentions several times in the narrative that Asya is so overwhelmed by Saif's intelligence, sense of humour and good looks that she feels him to be superior to her. When she is with him she feels that she is immature, illogical, not very intelligent, and embarrassed to say whatever is on her mind. In relationships, Asya adopts two roles, one with her family and friends where she acts like her real self, saying and expressing whatever comes to her mind without reservations. The second role surfaces with Saif where she feels vulnerable, childish, insecure and inferior.

Saif, on the other hand, treats Asya like a child both before and after marriage. He protects and cares for her. This marked the relationship from the beginning as a hierarchal one. Saif is the superior and Asya is inferior. Sometimes the reader feels that he treats her like a sister, sometimes like a daughter, but hardly a lover or a wife. After an argument they had, Saif says to Asya: 'Ok, princess, lets just leave it. I love you. I love you well enough to live with you like a sister.'[136] This is exactly what he does.

The power Asya has on Saif is that she gives him the emotional security he needs. He knows that she loves him and takes that fact for granted. But Asya was more ambitious and more optimistic which scared him as he thought he might lose her. This is partly because of previous relationships he had and partly because he wants Asya to

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[135] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 131
[136] ibid: 302

be dependant on him as it guarantees that she will not leave him. More importantly, Saif's attitude is due to the tradition of misogyny in which he was brought up. Patriarchal power stems from the desire to possess and the fear that without it one will not be safe. Asya does not mind being dependant on Saif because it connotes love, affection, and sexual desire. But the situation changes completely when Saif fails to make love to her. This is something she cannot cope with yet she does not consider it a good reason to leave him. She associates and attaches her relationship with Saif to her relationship with her father or nation,

> 'Leave him [Saif]? Your honour, my husband won't perform his conjugal – Absurd. She [Asya] might as well talk of leaving her father, or her country. She might as well talk of leaving herself.'[137]

Asya realises that the only way to keep everyone satisfied is to look for desire elsewhere. This is what instigates her affair with the British Gerald Stone through which she learns that desire is different from love. As far as she is concerned, her affair with Gerald is not really cheating, because her love for Saif never ceased just like her love for her father and her country. They are both unconditional and unchanging. Her affair with Gerald gives her the chance to get what she is deprived of, namely, the fulfilment of sexual desire. Being deprived from sexual pleasure gives rise to feelings of oppression and suppression by social expectations and the need to conform. Asya expresses that her oppression is similar to the fugitives' oppression because in her homeland she is not capable of being herself and attaining her needs. For her, Beirut is liberating, it is the place where she declares her adulthood rebelling against her social and cultural norms.

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[137] ibid: 359

When Asya is in Beirut with Saif before they got married, she wonders,

> 'What had Saif told the Contessa? That they were married? Engaged? In love? Does it matter? This is not Omar Khayyam where you dread the appearance of the hotel detective at the door of the bungalow. This is Beirut: Beirut where you can do anything and it's OK. Beirut the capital of a country with a history of hospitality to fugitives, to the oppressed.'[138]

Asya regards herself living under social sanctions as a fugitive and an oppressed. The change of country meant to her freedom and liberation. Asya realises that the only recourse available is submission to power or the creation of a stronger one in order to oppose it. She challenges patriarchal structures in her culture in many ways. She condemns the increase of social control over individuals especially women through disciplinary powers. She does not like to follow the masculine values of conquest, domination, and competition. Nor does she approve of the inability to articulate her desires because of repression by any kind of powerful authority in her culture. Asya defies social expectations because she believes they are wrong and unjust. She does not believe that people should conform to certain social ideals and norms if they are not based on equal rights and integrity. Women in the Arab world are to be proper wives, and follow societies' guidelines about how to play their designated roles. Asya, however, fits into almost no position that society tries to group her into. She refuses to be conventional or 'proper' in the traditional sense. She explodes when her mother suggests that she should go back home to her husband after a fight they have had. Asya says,

> 'Yes, that's always been your policy: minimise, appease, avoid confrontation, peace at any price – why shouldn't homes be ruined if they're ripe for ruining?... It's as if nothing matters but a peaceful life. Even though it's only *outwardly* peaceful, mind you. You've *never* stood up to Daddy. Not *once*. We are

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[138] ibid: 130

> supposed to believe you had this wonderfully happy marriage, but it was all at *your* expense.'[139]

Asya is a woman with strong opinions although in Soueif's world and the novel's, a silent, self-sacrificing, weak-willed woman is still the ideal. Soueif's high regard for Asya and her eccentricity is a criticism of, and resistance to this 'ideal' model of women. Regardless of social standing, character or personality, women are expected to cater to, and remain dependant on, their husbands and to occupy themselves with trivial recreational activities rather than important matters. Saif, for example, never truly shares his life with Asya. He never tells her what exactly his job is, he just deposits the money into her account and makes sure she does her shopping according to his likes. He never tells her why she cannot go with him to Syria where he works, informing her instead that what he does is quite dangerous. Saif does not believe it is important to tend to their sexual needs, because women with sexual desires are sinful and dirty. This is also part of the social expectation Soueif criticises. Men have taken the liberty to control women's desires because they assume that women are the origin of all sin. In *The Sexual Metaphor*, Helen Haste notes,

> It is taken for granted that females do not have autonomous sexual feeling, only a desire for procreation. One has only to think what a difference it would make to both rhetoric and metaphor if the phrase commonly used by sociobiological writers about women was 'the human female is continuously sexually demanding' rather than, as is the case in their literature, 'the human female is continuously sexually receptive.'[140]

Soueif states clearly in her narrative that females are as sexually demanding as men are, and that women's sexuality does not run in tandem with that of men. Asya contemplates,

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[139] ibid: 299
[140] Haste,1993: 65

> They tell you – all your life they tell you – that a woman's sexuality is responsive, a woman's sexuality is tied up with her emotions. Her [Asya's] mother says she never even thought of any man that way except her [Asya's] father. Dada Zeina claims she had never desired any man but her husband – and then only because he had taught her. But Asya had seen a letter in one of Saif's magazines in which a housewife had described how, feeling lustful after her husband has gone to work, she undresses and makes love with candles...and Asya told her mother, who'd said that the letter hadn't been written by a woman at all but by some sub-editor on the magazine and that all it was was another male fantasy, Is she a freak, then? But it isn't like that; she does not want to make love with *things*.[141]

The narrative reveals that according to Arab socio-cultural expectations, there are certain ways of being a 'man' and certain ways of being a 'woman.' Both are socially constructed. It argues, however, that despite of vehement efforts to entrench and sustain these expectations, human nature is highly fluid and flexible and sexuality is subject to an enormous degree of socio-cultural moulding.[142] In *Sexual Stigma*, Kenneth Plummer notes that 'sexuality has no meaning other than that given to it in social situations.'[143] There are many structures of power in sexuality but gender is the most important. Sexual difference is crucial to the construction and maintenance of power relations between men and women because biological differences are the foundation that has served to legitimise gender inequality. *In the Eye of the Sun* focuses on patriarchal as well as colonial/imperial discourses as both are phallocentric, supremacist ideologies that subjugate and dominate their subjects.

2.2.2 The Female Body: A Colonial and Patriarchal Encounter

In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon suggests that the reasons for the inferiority complex of the black or Eastern man, besides the psychological reasons, are the social

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[141] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 390-1
[142] See Weeks, 1986
[143] Plummer, 1975: 32

and economic aspects. Colonised people suffer from an "inferiority complex in their souls", which is created by the death and burial of their own local cultural originality. They find themselves face to face with the language of the civilising nation and its culture. After returning from the coloniser's land to his original environment, the colonised conveys the impression that he has completed a cycle and added to himself something that was lacking; he returns 'full' of himself. The lack of interest in the colonised, in his language and culture adds to his anger, the coloniser's indifference, classifying him, imprisoning him, primitivizing him, and decivilising him. This may be the reason why he tries to prove the existence of his civilisation to the white empire at any cost.[144]

The native man considered that the 'protection' of the native woman as one of the most important factors that helped him protect his local culture and traditions from death and burial. The native woman became the centre of the nation, the mother of new generations. The Western colonising power, on the other hand, regarded the native woman as the conquered land, invading and colonising it on the pretext of civilising the indigenous people and liberating the native woman from her 'abusive' patriarchal society. She was a field of struggle between the two male forces, the coloniser and the colonised. Neither was concerned with her welfare, however.

Both the colonised and the coloniser took the liberty of speaking on behalf of the local woman. Although their claim was to either 'liberate' or 'protect,' the 'liberation' of the local woman was represented and implemented according to their values and desires. Until today, those desires are based on male's domination whether Western or

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[144] Fanon, 1967: 13

Eastern. Women became the terrain on which men move and enact their battles with each other. The Western man oppresses the Eastern man and the Eastern man's form of resistance is to oppress the Eastern woman. Therefore, anybody who is not a white European male is inferior, and women are at the bottom of the scale. Ania Loomba suggests,

> The analogy between the subordination of women and colonial subjects runs the risk of erasing the specificity of colonialist and patriarchal ideologies, besides tending to homogenise both 'women' and 'non-Europeans.[145]

However, to say that all Arab women live under the same kind of oppression is a major generalisation. In underprivileged families women tend to be oppressed more than in privileged and educated ones. In the same manner, the oppression the African woman suffers from is not very similar to the one the Arab woman lives in. Each lives in a cultural context governed by different laws, traditions and power relations.

Although the coloniser acknowledged these differences, he represented all women in other cultures as the conquered land and a field of struggle. Female bodies symbolise the colonised land. The Arab woman is heavily veiled, wealthy and suppressed. The local man was effeminised.[146] He was portrayed as homosexual, or as a lust villain from whom the courteous white man could rescue the native woman.

This relationship between coloniser and colonised and the struggle over the female body is portrayed in Asya, Saif and Gerald's affair. For the duration of his affair with Asya, Gerald Stone never calls her by her real name. He constantly addresses or refers to her as 'baby', 'babe' or 'man'. Gerald glorifies Asya as if she is attached to royalty.

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[145] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 163
[146] See ibid.

He wants to possess everything she owns in return for sexual gratification. He also wants her total submission to him. Asya's desire for sexuality represents the desire of the native woman for the European man, which is coded in the submission of the colonised people. Loomba notes that,

> Eastern royal or upper class/caste women being watched by, consorting with, and being saved by, European men is a feature of colonial narratives from the seventeenth century to the present.[147]

But Asya's desires are not merely for a British man as a coloniser whom she feels inferior to. She merely desires the sexual 'liberation' that Gerald Stone offers her. She yearns for the sexual satisfaction that she could not have with her husband due to an oppressive system of social mores.

Gerald lives off Asya's wealth and takes advantage of Saif's possessions. He stays in Saif's cottage, consumes Asya's food and uses Saif's car. Asya uses him sexually. He is portrayed as a very possessive man. Their relationship is characterised by the dynamics of ambivalent attraction and revulsion, very hostile sometimes and very awkward at other times. Asya is too sophisticated for Gerald, but ironically he pinpoints her most glaring fault, he says,

> 'The trouble with you…is that all your ideas are second-hand; they are derived from art – not life….O.K. You're intelligent, you're bright, you're good at taking things to pieces, but you're not good at putting them together again. You're not clever enough for that.'[148]

Gerald wishes to 'rescue' and 'liberate' Asya from her husband and from her second hand ideas. He also wants her to be a slave to his demands by possessing her and her

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[147] ibid: 153
[148] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 706

body. Ania Loomba suggests that the white man's burden was constructed as a parental one. He wanted to look after those who were underdeveloped, and discipline them into obedience.[149]

This is Saif's stand too. He, as mentioned earlier, treats her like a child, addresses her as 'princess' and demands her obedience. Asya ends up being torn between two possessive men who attempt to control her and win her over not because they love her but because both men seek power over her and over each other. This manifests itself in an aggressive form; both insult her verbally, physically and sexually. Gerald wants to win Asya by satisfying her sexual desires and Saif wants to assert his possession over her. Asya's relationship with the Englishman represents a colonial encounter. Gerald takes over Saif's wife and his house, which symbolises the cultural and imperial take over of national symbols. Saif says in anger,

> 'You invited him in for a coffee – and you let him fuck you.' He shakes his head. 'Here in this house. In *my* house.'
> Asya watches him.
> After a moment he says, 'What else did he do – apart from fuck my wife in my house? Drive my car? Try on my clothes?'
> 'No,' says Asya.
> 'Drink my whiskey? Leaf through my books?'[150]

Saif, in the above quote, refers to his possession of Asya together with his house, car, clothes, books and whiskey. To him, as a wife, she is just another item he owns. Kate Millet notes that the usage of the term 'wife' in such contexts implies inferiority and reflects the status of sexual power relations.[151] The fact that Asya has committed adultery is a big shock to Saif, a blow to his vanity, his sense of property and his masculine birthright superiority. He says,

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[149]Loomba, 2000 (1998): 217
[150] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 632
[151] Millet,1997: 49

'I *expected* my wife to be loyal. I *expected* my wife to have some sense of honour. I *expected* –
'But you've been saying that you thought *something* was happening – what did you think-
'I *thought* – I *thought* it was some romantic hand-holding shit-
'I'm *twenty-six*,' Asya screams. 'I'm not twelve. I'm twenty-six and I've been waiting for *nine years*-
'You bitch,' Saif says slowly. 'I wouldn't have thought you could even *speak* like that'[152]

Saif's sexual jealousy can be seen as more than a universal statement about human jealousy. He stresses the fact that his wife not only has betrayed him but has done so with a Western man. At a certain point, the novel suggests that it would have been acceptable to him if Asya had an affair with another man as long as he was not British. His jealousy is invested with political undertones in the form of the struggle between the West and the East. Saif says,

> 'An Englishman. You fucked an Englishman.'
> Asya turns and sits in an armchair.
> 'You fucked an Englishman,' Saif says again.
> Asya looks at him: he stands by the kitchen table looking like a sleepwalker.
> 'Would it have been better,' she asks, 'if he'd been Egyptian? Or Iraqi? Or Palestinian?'
> 'You don't know him,' Saif says. 'You can't have known him. You fucked an Englishman you didn't know.'[153]

Gerald depicts Saif as a lust villain from whom Asya should be rescued. Saif's 'cruel' behaviour with his wife becomes a major justification for imperial rule. This interference in the local's culture creates a counter opposition as Saif strikes back against Gerald in order to obtain rule over Asya. He assumes that he would regain his freedom and dignity by doing so.

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[152] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 632
[153] ibid: 630

Saif's hypocrisy and double standards are evident in the manner he preaches about cultural and religious values to Asya, while following a different path of behaviour. He has no compunction about consuming alcohol and engaging in extra-marital affairs. He does not, however, believe that this right extends to Asya since as a woman she should be a paragon of honour and chastity. Many Arab women writers and poets address this kind of hypocrisy in Arab culture. They are disturbed by the fact that women have been burdened by moral commitments not applied to men. Nāzik al –Mala'ika, for example, addresses women's status in society in the most eloquent statement of women's rights so far. In her poem, *Ghaslan li-l-'ār*, Nāzik al-Mala'ika describes how a woman was killed by her relatives because she dishonoured and brought shame upon them. They washed away the shame by killing her, and then, with no shame or respect to their religious values, to their culture or the dead they celebrated the killing by drinking alcohol and dancing in bars. The poem highlights male hypocrisy and double standards in Arab societies.[154]

The virginity of the girl and the chastity of the married woman become two of the most important issues in the colonised man's world. This is not an outcome of religious understanding or traditional values because he himself does not pay much regard to religion and traditions in his behaviour. This is due to hypocrisy, selfishness and self-satisfaction. Men believe that their superiority over women means that socio-religious rules do not apply to them. They believe that these rules, if religious, were ordained by God to serve men, and if social, stipulated my men in order to apply God's teachings. If Saif's anger was moral-based, then he would have been a good example of somebody who refrains from committing these sinful acts of pleasure.

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[154] Al-Mala'ika, 1986

Soueif gives another example of male hypocrisy. The Egyptian man in *In the Eye of the Sun*, Mahrous, travels to England for the purpose of studying. This character depicts the aggrieved colonised man. His behaviour is compared to that of a 'savage' and a 'rapist' who travels to the West, suffers from culture shock and attempts to rape the white woman who symbolises European culture. This reverses the violence from the coloniser to the colonised. Frantz Fanon explains,

> The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession – all manner of possession: to sit at the settlers table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. The colonised man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive 'The want to take our place'. It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place.[155]

Mahrous represents a naïve man who mistakes a friendly smile from an English woman for a sexual invitation. Thereby, he is not only a 'savage' and a 'rapist' but also appears like a child who needs to be guided. He, however, having attempted to respond to the alleged sexual invitation insists on the honour and the integrity of Arab women in his life. He refuses to lose them for Western cultural values. This position is typical of Eastern men who regard the honour of women in their families as symbols of the man's honour. Mahrous says,

> 'She [an English woman] said all women are like that. She told me of my wife, of my mother'. He [Mahrous] jumps to his feet. 'What is a person to live for? How can a man live if his honour isn't guaranteed? What will he build his life on? Can my father imagine that my mother is looking at other men? If a thought like that had crossed his mind he would have strangled her.'[156]

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[155] Fanon, 1967: 30
[156] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 552

This theme of sexual encounter between Arab men and Western women is not unusual in other narratives written by Arab female or male writers as it is central to the confrontation between East and West. Arab writers like Tayeb Saleh, Tawfik al Hakeem, and Yahyā Haqī, write in Arabic referring to the issue of sexual politics and the image of the colonised's desire to regain his dignity by raping or having sex with the white woman. In *Season of Migration to the North,* for example, the male protagonist, Sa'eed, travels to England for the purpose of education. He ends up attempting to avenge the colonisation and the sufferings of his nation through sexual encounters with white women. He describes himself as an invader who invades the heart of the Empire, he says,

> 'Yes, my dear sirs, I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history.'[157]

Sa'eed pursues women and desires their bodies. Victory over the white man is enacted in the act of sexual intercourse with a white woman. But sexual encounters do not suffice since his intent does not lie in achieving mere equality or imitating the white man. His real purpose is revenge for his nation so he kills white women or pushes them to commit suicide, as if his strategy is to throw colonisation back at the coloniser in order to gain his freedom. He does this by consuming and then killing what is considered the honour and the symbol of a nation.

What makes *In the Eye of the Sun* bold and daring is the fact that the female body involved belongs to an Arab woman and the white man is consciously used by the protagonist to satisfy her needs. This is why the novel is considered by many as immoral and is rejected entry into Arabic literature. References to Arab women's

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[157] *Season of Migration to the North,* 95

bodies are considered a taboo especially when they are made by an Arab woman and directed to the Western reader. This act is considered as breaking of 'sacred' traditions of patriarchy.

Asya's body was not raped or aggressively taken by Gerald or by Saif initially but this changed as the battle intensified between both men. Many incidents in the novel show how her body was abused to assert their power, possession and supremacy. Saif contemplates,

> *'I hit her. I hit her with my open hand across her face....I knelt beside her. I pushed her and she lay back. I did not wait to undress her but just pulled her pants down and over her feet. Then I rubbed them in her face and forced the gusset into her mouth. I held her hands above her head and fucked her, truly fucked her, for the first time in our marriage. She fell asleep afterwards, right there on the floor, and I kept my arms around her all night, but in her sleep she turned away from me. I thought then that I would do anything to hang on to her.'*[158]

Gerald to Asya,

> 'It will never be over between us. Never. Baby, you've got to know that.' With his right hand he strokes her neck. 'I'd rather strangle you right now,' he says…
> 'Let me go' cries Asya. '*Let me go'*
> She tries to bring her knees together. She pushes at his arm. He puts one arm across her neck and keeps his other hand between her legs….
> She scratches at his face but he holds his head further back…..
> 'Let me go, I can't stand you-…I want you to take your lousy fingers *out* of me…' 'I *hate* you,' Asya says. 'You're chocking me.'[159]

Such scenes in the novel give descriptions of sexual intercourse in the service of power. Gestures of contempt and physical or emotional abuse are consolidations of man's position of power. Both men in both scenes assert their dominance over the

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[158] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 653 (original text in italics)
[159] ibid: 657

weak, compliant female. Asya's genitalia become a means of her humiliation and inferiority. This is usually a triumph of the male ego.

Asya realises the connection in the West between race and sex when she notices that all the women Gerald was involved with were foreigners. She gets disturbed when seen as an exotic Egyptian woman. She refuses Gerald when he tries to frame her within a stereotype that does not match with her identity. She says,

> 'Why have all your girl-friends been from 'developing' countries?'
> 'What?'
> 'You've never had a white girl friend, why?'
> 'I don't think that way, man.'
> 'Yes you do - and the reason you've gone to Trinidad – Vietnam – Egypt - is so you can feel superior. You can be the big white boss – you are a sexual imperialist –'
> 'You don't even believe what you're saying.' Gerald laughs.
> 'Yes I do. You pretend - to yourself as well - that it's because you don't notice race - or it's because these cultures retain some spiritual quality lost in the West – you pride yourself that you dance 'like a black man' – but that's all just phoney –'[160]

Finally, Asya learns to distinguish between love and desire, but she concludes that these two are not compatible and cannot exist in the same relationship. She loved and desired Saif before marriage, but when it became a social and an official matter, those feelings disappeared. She finds desire with Gerald, but without love. She finally returns to her homeland after finishing her PhD having obtained neither. Sadly, the novel seems to suggest that love and desire can never converge.

In her collections of short stories, Soueif's reveals different kinds of men's power over women in the name of patriarchy as she portrays brutal images of women from different classes. I will discuss a few of these short stories as they reveal sexual

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[160] ibid: 723

desires and gender power relations and hence are considered important to support the analysis I have given of *In the Eye of the Sun*. In addition to this, the collection of short stories in *Aisha* was written before *In the Eye of the Sun* and considered to be the starting point of the novel as it portrays short stories of Asya's life and experiences. 'The wedding of Zeina' in *Aisha*, for example, depicts brutal images of women's life in rural Egypt. The story gives an account of the trauma that the fifteen-year-old Zeina had on the night of her marriage. She had to comprehend the choice of the husband her family forced upon her and the tiresome and painful wedding preparations. Above all, she had to cope with the shock she had on that night by the violence and force used by the groom to penetrate her with his bandaged finger with the help of other family members. Zeina describes her uncle exhibiting the sign of her virginity,

> 'My uncle wound it around his head, blood and all, and danced slowly and proudly into the crowd using his gun like a cane to dance with and calling out 'Our Honour, Our daughter's Honour, Our family's honour.'[161]

This short story reveals that although sexuality is a forbidden subject, it is celebrated under the 'right' social circumstances. In Arab cultures, sexuality is confined to marriage and the body of the woman becomes sexualised and objectified because of its role as a child bearer or as a symbol of the family's honour. This shows that sexuality is a question of social constructions and categories that exist in one society but are not applicable in another. It also reveals that sexuality is not something that power represses, but rather it is a conduit of power. What is also significant in this story is that it shows that women stand accomplices to the very same power that represses them. For example Zeina's grandmother explains to the child what marriage

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[161] *Aisha*, 82

is. She says, 'You'll be his wife and he'll be your husband and you'll serve him and do what he tells you.[162]' According to this, marriage is a servant/master relationship rather than partnership. The grandmother's advice to Zeina is derived from a social and cultural set up that declares the masculine to be a model of dominion and the feminine a model of submission. Hierro suggests, 'it is not men or sex that shapes the structure of society but the configuration of power: hierarchal or participatory.'[163]

Zeina falls into this social system and says later,

> 'Afterwards Setti[164] explained that he was my husband and any time he wanted to do anything with me I must let him and not fight him. But I did,' Zeina said, laughing. 'I fought him every time for a month, but in the end he mastered me.'[165]

The usage of the word 'mastered' suggests taming and training into obedience, and laughter suggests a mutual consensus of both genders to a certain hierarchy in this social organisation.

In order to understand patriarchal power, it must be noted that its biggest component is the intensive desire to possess. This, indeed, stems from men's desire to control but more importantly it stems from the fear that without this power they will not be safe or will suffer from impotence. In order to take power, men have to hate and fear women. Men also have to find women threatening in order to legitimise any political control and to demonstrate their superiority using the devices they find appropriate.[166] Soueif demonstrates this on many occasions, but the most disturbing is revealed in the short story 'The Water-Heater' where the protagonist's misogyny leads him astray. The novelist again illustrates men's power over women and the violence used to

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[162] ibid: 85
[163] Hierro, 1994: 175
[164] Grandmother
[165] *Aisha*, 92
[166] Hierro, 1994: 176

dominate them. Saleh, the protagonist, is portrayed as a religious man who follows Islamic rules strictly. He is also a law student who considers Human Law to be orderly and precise. He says that Human Law 'showed Man working out the moral good, the will of God, and following it.'[167] Although his fear of God pulled him away from sin, his fear of women did not.

Saleh's contempt for women led him to desire his own sister. He idealised Faten whose name means 'appealing, attractive and bewitching,' when he compared her with other women he saw in public places. He contemplates,

> 'So different from all other girls; her face innocent and trusting, her voice soft and low and shy. Always sparkling clean and smelling of sweet soap as she went about her duties in the house or bent over to do her homework. No flirting, no arguments, just acceptance and respect and love. And what had he done? He had broken God's explicit commandments…'[168]

Acceptance, respect and love are considered part of the dichotomy that makes the masculine superior and the feminine inferior. Part of the feminine inferiority arises out of the fact that females are in charge of the 'invisible' domestic realm; house work. Saleh thinks: 'She [Faten] kept them [clothes] so neat; always laundered, smelling fresh, never a button missing and the shoes always polished – and he never saw her do it, there they are all laid tidily…'[169] Faten is an ethereal creature. What she did and how she did it was invisible to him because patriarchy treats women as if they did not exist but, paradoxically, they are indispensable in the construction of men's subjectivities.

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[167] *Sandpiper*, 75
[168] ibid: 75-76
[169] ibid: 68

Once these feminine characteristics are doubted in a female, she becomes a threat to men's superior position and then force becomes necessary. Although Faten is sixteen, Saleh's dormant incestuous desires for her cast doubts on her innocence and good manners. Saleh contemplates,

> 'Women. They say you never know with women, for they are deficient in brain and morality. Perhaps she feels the same and conceals it. But she seems so innocent. So frank. Her face an open book. Surely she has no secrets, no dark thoughts, no feelings that could not be confessed to. And yet can you really know? Can you ever really know?'[170]

Despite all his prayers, Saleh could not get rid of his feelings towards his sister. When he finally approaches her, he sees a French magazine on her desk given to her by her French language teacher. One of the pictures in the magazine depicts a clear outline of a woman's breasts. Saleh interprets that as a clear sign of depravity. It also suggests Western influence to pollute Faten's innocence. After hitting her for finding the magazine interesting, he begins to make sexual advances but is interrupted by the arrival of their mother. He decides later that Faten must be married to her cousin despite his initial rejection of the idea earlier in the story. He tells his mother,

> 'Marriage is protection. Lets do it quickly and she can move in with her aunt until he finds a flat. I've been thinking about this a lot and I am sure I'm right.'
> 'Whatever you say, my son. You are the man of this house.'[171]

Power and sexual pleasure are closely interrelated. A man's sexual pleasure is interwoven into the power he exercises. Foucault describes the relationship between pleasure and power as spiral; they pursue one another in a circular pattern.[172] Saleh's perverse sexual desires are the direct result of the power he exercises over his sister. Thus, both power and sexuality become sources of identical pleasure. Saleh as an

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[170] ibid: 76
[171] ibid: 84
[172] See Foucault, 1998 (1976)

individual, however, is not the source or creator of this power. For a Power to be effective, it must form a network of relations. Hierarchal power is a power of groups rather than individuals. Men have collective power over women who represent that oppressed group.[173] Thus, Saleh, as an individual, has power over his mother and sister because he represents the patriarchal group.

Soueif does not neglect homosexuality as a form of power. Homosexuality, like heterosexuality, exists in a specific cultural context. In her work, Soueif illustrates liberation as a complex process through which her characters unfold and shape themselves through their sexual, social, and political desires. She explores desire not as a binary of hetero and homosexuality, but rather as a set of possibilities in life. In 'Her Man' in *Aisha,* Soueif demonstrates how two co-wives, one of whom was the previously mentioned Zeina in 'The Wedding of Zeina,' can experience sexual pleasure together as well as with their husband. Though the sexual intimacy is seen as enjoyable, its hidden purpose is freedom and liberation. The first wife, Zeina, resorts to deceit and dishonesty to betray the second wife claiming that the latter has dishonoured their husband while he was away. The story reveals the naivety of the foolish husband, and more importantly reveals that the blame in the dynamics of sexual politics cannot be gender-specific; women can betray other women. [174]

By the same token, men can betray other men. In 'The Apprentice' in *Aisha*, Soueif gives an example of male homosexuality. Yosri, a young boy from a lower class family, starts working at a lady's hairdresser called Romance. He then starts fancying his female customers whenever he touches their hair and ears. He reflects his

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[173] See Amoros,1988, and Hierro, 1994
[174] Malak, 2000: 142

sensations in the way he dresses; his dark blue shirt half unbuttoned and a golden chain on his chest. With that, he arouses the desires of a male mechanic who sexually prevails upon Yosri. Unlike in 'Her Man,' Soueif reveals that male homosexuality includes aggression and force. She does not allude to pleasure or enjoyment but shows feelings of fear and horror. Homosexual encounter between men, as the story reveals, is nothing but intrusion, rape and domination. Male homosexuality also signifies defeat as when Saif tells his wife in *In the Eye of the Sun* after being 'defeated' and humiliated by the white lover, 'you can invite him back and he can fuck me too.'[175] In comparison, women's homosexuality portrayed in 'Her Man' is shown as a strategy of defence where the woman tries to protect herself from the other.

In the complex illustrations of various power and sexual relations in the Arab World, Soueif suggests that Islam as a religion and a civilisation should not be condemned or disavowed for the oppression of women. Western imperialists argue that the problems of Arab women stem from the substance and the values of Islam.[176] However, as revealed in the analysed narratives, the oppression of women is caused by men and the social hierarchy that supports them. Although Soueif attempts to condemn the abusive patriarchal societies in the Arab World when and where appropriate, she does not fail to exploit the religious angle in order to preserve the spiritual authority in these societies. This is done by revealing an unmistakable sense of attachment between the characters and the Islamic culture in which they live. Asya says to herself after having the affair with Gerald,

> 'You [Asya] are an Arab, a Muslim, if the law of your people were applied you would be stoned to death – but would she? You are only stoned to death if you are a *muhasanah*, is she truly a

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[175] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 633
[176] See El-Saadawi, 1980, and Ahmad 1992

> *muhasanah*? What is the fort that protects her within its walls? How has she been made secure? How much care has her husband devoted to making her secure? No, she would not be stoned – and anyway, where are the four witnesses? The birds, the cows two fields away? And besides, the door of repentance is always open.'[177]

Malak notes that,

> The works of almost all Arab and Muslim women writers in English reveal an unequivocal sense of affiliation with their Islamic culture, while at the same time condemning and combating the abusive excesses of patriarchy when it appropriates and exploits the religious argument to preserve its own spiritual and material hegemony.[178]

We find the feminist, sexually liberated Asya saying 'under certain circumstances ...polygamy is acceptable.' She says 'I don't believe in polygamy...but I don't condemn it out of hand.'[179] She defends her position by deploying the cultural relativist argument: 'I wouldn't judge a cannibal by criteria other than those of his own society.'[180]

In a review of the novel, however, Leila Ahmed criticises Ahdaf Soueif for focusing only on 'the Islam of the middle and upper class.' She argues,

> Asya is of middle-class background; the Islam of the middle and upper classes, an urbane, cosmopolitan, secular or near-secular Islam, is of course not the only Islam there is. Moreover, it is an Islam that differs from the Islamic habits and attitudes of other classes. While it is entirely appropriate for the middle-class heroine to direct a hostile and Western-like gaze toward the habits, attitudes and political perspectives of other classes, it might have been more satisfying if the author, as distinct from the heroine, had shown some awareness of Asya's class biases.[181]

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[177] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 541
[178] Malak, 2000: 144
[179] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 401
[180] ibid: 401
[181] Ahmad, 1993: 6

In the novel Soueif does portray images of other classes, such as Dada Zeina who discusses in detail with Asya the sexual mystery between the protagonist and her husband, and whose story has been revealed in 'The Wedding of Zeina' and 'Her Man.' Soueif also narrates the story of Toota in *In the Eye of the Sun* whom Asya envied terribly. Asya says, 'she was so much more sophisticated and knew everything and could dress as tight and as short as she chose because her father was dead and she had no uncles or brothers.'[182] The novelist does, indeed, reveal Asya's class biases by the heroine's reaction towards an underprivileged woman who prepared her bedspread before the wedding. Asya complains to Chrissie: 'She has no legs. She lives in this awful squalor but with this – this *travesty* of a drawing room. She has to sleep with the most disgusting old man I've ever seen – ever *imagined*. She has to somehow deliver herself of his children. And she spends her days crocheting silk flowers for my bedspread.'[183]

The focus, however, is on Asya's image as a upper-middle- class woman in the novel. Other classes are secondary since the narrative is situated in the protagonist's social class. Soueif has chosen the upper-middle-class because she herself is the product of that class. She draws upon her own experiences in framing Asya's character, thus her heroine's biases as well as her awareness of reality are derived from Soueif's own experiences.[184] When Asya returns to Egypt as a professor of English Literature at Cairo University, she becomes conscious of other women whose class affiliations are not as privileged as hers. She realises that these women are very conservative and wear '*hijab.*' Asya also realises that the world in which she lives is only part of the bigger picture. One Islamist female student refuses to participate in

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[182] *In the Eye of the Sun,* 248
[183] ibid: 229
[184] See Massad, 1999 and Pakravan, 1995

Asya's class because she claims that women's voice is '*awra*' (which means a private part that cannot be revealed). Asya is so preoccupied with her own image that she misses the wider social and symbolic implications of a woman silencing her own voice.[185] Asya thinks to herself,

> 'The voice of woman a '*awra*. Of course, she'd always known that theoretically, but she'd never come across anyone for whom it was a living truth before. So, as far as this girl – and the other who thought like her – were concerned she was doing a sort of porno-spread up here on the podium for the world to see…'[186]

The novel is not merely about Asya's individual experiences, but an account of the Arab world in general. This is evident from the way the narrative of Asya's journey is punctuated by a backdrop of political events as they unravel. Asya's impotent life with her husband is a reflection on the Arabs' emotional life too. Both journeys are intertwined; both feel the frustration, the defeat and the devastation. The smaller journey is masterly portrayed as a reflection of the bigger picture of the Arab world. Saif contemplates,

> *It felt like the end of something. 'Yesterday all the past.' It felt like another part of a closing chapter that had started in 1967 – before I had even met her [Asya]. The whole autumn and winter. 'Abd el-Nasser dead, Sinai captured. The opera house burnt down. I have the photos I took that early morning: dove-white building a scorched ruin, three slim white chairs covered in red velvet lying on their side, in the drive, the marble staircase intact. I thought she [Asya] understood.*
> *That day in Alexandria we also bought a carved desk and some sofas and chairs with feather cushions and inlaid work and a couple of screen. We did not see a bed that we liked.'* [187]

The novel should not be reduced to an account of class differences but ought to be considered within the wider political perspective. Saif's impotence is a symbol of the Arab nation's political impotence. Asya is a symbol of the identity crises the Arab

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[185] Malak, 2000: 15
[186] *In the Eye of the Sun*, 745
[187] ibid: 222 (Original text in italics)

nation is going through in the throes of imperialism and globalisation. The novel's problematisation of sexual politics transcends the limits of the mundane to present force and strength towards political liberation.

2.3 Conclusion

Sexual politics pertain to the problematisation of the relationship between both Western and Eastern men with Arab women. As the novel reveals and as the term suggests, sexual politics is a productive dynamic that determines the production of stereotypes, engenders the oppression of women and has always served patriarchal conditioning.

Patriarchy is a power structure that is created for many reasons, but especially for the marginalisation of women. Women become invisible although they continue to perform all their duties or they become chests of gold owned by men to lock and unlock whenever they please for their pleasure. The misogynistic features of Arab cultures are encouraged by many institutions in order to consolidate the masculine features of power. Soueif employs counteractive representations in order to assert the importance of the female in Arab societies. Those who consider the narrative as degrading and immoral for its representations of Arab women are the same people the novel attempts to condemn. Expressions of feminine needs and drives are paramount in this context of power struggle in order to resist and to promote change in practices that have appallingly persisted for decades.

The fact that the novel is addressed to the Western reader is also of a special importance as it attempts to rupture and resist Western systems of knowledge in

relation to Arab/Muslim women. Ahdaf Soueif attempts to reconstruct the stereotype of the Arab woman by seeking to change the Western conception of them as lazy, sensual, exotic and easy. These latter qualities are applicable to the protagonist who shall be examined in the next chapter. Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator* is animated by forces totally opposite to those that manifest themselves in Soueif's work.

Chapter Three

Leila Aboulela: Religious Reconciliation and Patriarchal Assimilation

> *Muslims adopt religious dichotomies in which peoples of the world are either Mu'minoon (believers) or Kafironon (non-believers). If the Orientalist's view of the Orient is redolent in racism as Said (1978) maintains, for Muslims at least in theory, non-believers are not inherently 'bad' or 'inferior,' they only need the 'right' religion. Consequently, Muslim positional superiority is not based on intrinsic qualities specific to a certain race, but on the acceptance of religious ideas that can be shared by all humans.*[188]

3.1 Introduction

Laura Nader in 'Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Control of Women' notes that 'positional superiority' between civilizations takes different forms and makes use of different mechanisms. Western positions of superiority are translated into technology and development programs dedicated to transforming the lives of the underdeveloped.[189] Development becomes a strategy by which the West can claim superiority, holding the underdeveloped as 'prisoners' in the claim of promoting and spreading progress. The East, however, claims positional superiority by more philosophical and spiritual rhetoric as Nader suggests in the above quotation. Religion and faith become the standards by which people measure superiority and inferiority.

This chapter focuses on the works of Leila Aboulela concentrating on her only novel, *The Translator* in addition to highlighting major themes in her collection of short stories *Coloured Lights*. Both narratives demonstrate an attempt to reconcile Islam and the West in the middle of the current political predicament. The author focuses on religious codes to reveal the centrality of religion in politics. Sammar is the main

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[188] Nader, 1989: 327-328
[189] ibid: 328

protagonist in the novel. She is originally Sudanese working as a translator in Aberdeen in Scotland. She 'mediates' between Arabic and English as part of her job but the author attempts to present her as a mediator between the two cultures that these languages represent. Since Arabic is spoken by a wide range of cultures and peoples and the same can be said for English, the two languages become symbolic of the East-West dichotomy, which is reflected in the text. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes evident that Sammar is in fact mediating between Islam and the West as culture takes a backstage to religion. In the course of her work, she meets Rae, a professor of Colonial studies at the University of Aberdeen. The two end up falling in love but are separated by religious codes, as the pressing need to convert is forced upon Rae by Sammar who cannot marry him unless he converts to Islam. Rae is presented as an 'expert' on Islam and developing countries. He is very sympathetic to their cause and seems to understand them better than most Westerners. The reconciliation between the West and Islam is achieved when Rae converts at the end of the novel, and he and Sammar decide to get married.

Against the backdrop of these events, there is Sammar's first husband who died in a car crash, the son she subsequently abandons to her mother-in-law, the scores of relatives back home and the country to which she does not want to go back. Rae's life is no less 'volatile.' He had been married twice, has a daughter, and suffers from Asthma. The third prominent character is Sammar's friend, Yasmin. She is originally from Pakistan and works as Rae's secretary.

This chapter focuses on Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and its reconciliatory discourse between Islam and the West in the middle of the current political chaos. The

author focuses on women as the representatives of religious and social codes. This reveals the centrality of gender relations and religion to a constructive dialogue between Islam and the West, emphasising the notion that women are symbols of 'authentic' traditions. Through examining the narrative and female identities represented, this chapter will focus on religious reconciliation, home and exile, and the discourse of love as revealed in the works of Aboulela.

3.2 Reconciliation Between Islam and the West

Many literary texts and other discourses have, for centuries, reflected the West to have many conflicts with Islam and the Islamic world. Islam has been perceived to be the enemy, whether this is stated directly or indirectly. The West, on the other hand, has been reflected as a threat to religious and traditional values. These conflicts between East and West are still depicted today as they did in the past, but take different shapes and forms. The West took on its shoulder the 'liberation' of Islamic nations. This 'liberation' took various forms and claims. They claim to be liberating women from their patriarchal society, liberating people from their tyrant leaders, and/or liberating people from their oppressive religious values, which has been regarded as the main reason for their 'uncivilised traditions.' In *Covering Islam,* Said points out,

> I have not been able to discover any period in European or American history since the Middle Ages in which Islam was generally discussed or thought about outside a framework created by passion, prejudice, and political interests. This may not seem a surprising discovery, but included in it is the entire gamut of scholarly and scientific disciplines which, since the early nineteenth century, have either called themselves collectively the discipline of Orientalism, or have tried systematically to lead with the Orient.[190]

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[190] Said, 1997: 23

Many Western beliefs attribute the 'backwardness' of the Arab World to Islam and regard it as the West's worst enemy due to cultural, religious and social differences between the two civilisations. In 'Clash of Civilisations,' Samuel Huntington claims,

> The underlying problem for the west is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the US Department of Defence. It is the West, a different civilization whose people is convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that fuel conflict between Islam and the West.[191]

The novel in question portrays this conflict between Islam and the West in an attempt to correct the misperceptions of Muslims in the West. Many in the West consider Islam as inimical to civilised values while Muslims consider the West as a threat to the existence of their religion and cultural values. Aboulela writes a novel in an attempt to reconcile Islam and the West through dialogue. This dialogue is constructed using mainly Eastern voices in an attempt to promote Islamic religion as peaceful and tolerant and to respond to Western provocative criticism of Islam.

Aboulela claims that she was prompted by the hostility of the British media towards Arabs and Muslims during the First Gulf War when she decided to write *The Translator* and *Coloured Lights*. When she was asked why she felt the urge to write she replied, 'Just to express this feeling of being a Muslim, Arab, African woman in the West.'[192] Aboulela's statement emphasises all three identities and separates them from each other. Her religion, ethnicity, and geographical borders are all considered opposed to one entity: the West, with all the divisions and ideologies the term carries.

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[191] Cited in Noorani, 2002: 5
[192] See Hosny, 2002

By this statement, Aboulela foregrounds a world in which the battle lines are harder to draw and the opponent is harder to identify. A world in which dualism of any sort cannot be sustained easily. In *Recasting Postcolonialism* Anne Donadey notes that postcolonial literature underscores the fractures in the grand narratives of decolonisation. It begins to affect a slippage away from the (former) coloniser as its main target and instead turns to a multiplicity of struggles: the hopes of nationalism giving away to disillusion and/or corruption, the forces of cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism, continuing economic hardships, the spread of religious fundamentalism, and women's issues.[193]

Hence, the reason for Aboulela's choice to write in English is clear. Her aim is to target mainly the Western reader and at the same time to introduce a piece of fiction that appeals to both Muslim and Western readers in order to join them together not as one but as two civilisations existing in their own right. Through juxtaposing religious discourse and colonial discourse, the novelist attempts to create a new tongue in dialogue between Islam and the West in order to challenge accounts that portray the West and the Islamic World in strictly antagonistic terms.

The novel is very didactic in terms of portraying religious and cultural values, however. The novelist emphasises in a defensive manner that Muslims are not abnormal people, they have the right to choose according to their own socio-religious values and norms. She also acknowledges the continuation of the East/West struggle but provides an Eastern/Islamic perspective through a dialogue between the three major characters in *The Translator*. Sammar, the main character, is simplistic,

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[193] See Donadey, 2001

traditional and committed to Islamic values. Rae, a 'sympathetic' Orientalist, is also simplistic and plays a role in promoting Islamic values as an expert in Postcolonial Studies and the Arab World. The third character is Yasmin, a British born Pakistani, who represents the aggrieved colonised through expressing resentment to Western values.

All three characters, Sammar and Yasmin out of belief, and Rae as an expert in the field, portray Islam as a source of safety and security to all human beings. They demonstrate that Islam can be modern and true. This is demonstrated to refute misconceptions that Islamic religion is oppressive, ancient in its doctrines and stands against the modern 'civilised' world. The novel is loaded with references to *Allah* and references to many Islamic principles; such as the veil, the *shari'a*, and the *Sunna*. By using such references, the author attempts to reinstate her collective identity in the face of Western prejudices against Muslim cultures. Mernissi points out that the psychological result of the foreign powers' intervention in Muslim cultures was to transform *shari'a* into a symbol of Muslim identity and the integrity of the *Umma*.[194] Modern or Western changes were identified as the enemy's subtle tools for carrying out the destruction of Islam. As a result, Miriam Cook explains,

> Some women are joining religious groups despite their gender conservatism. Others are fighting these same groups, fearing the dangerous chemistry of politics and religion. Whether through or against religion, they are choosing to become part of the struggle for a better world.[195]

Aboulela chooses to reclaim Islam in this struggle. She joins both politics and religion in an attempt to proclaim religion amidst political chaos. She attempts to

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[194] See Mernissi, 1975
[195] Cook, 2001: 55

reveal that religion is a rational way of life rather than an oppressive system of fundamentalism or extremism. Sammar asks herself, 'Did he [Rae] teach his students that the difference between Western liberalism and Islam was that the centre of one was freedom and the other justice?'[196]

The attempt to emphasise the colonised culture and its heritage is a characteristic of postcolonial literature. This literature encompasses texts written to express a nation's identity and to reclaim its past in the face of its created Otherness. It emerged out of the experience of colonisation and asserts itself by emphasising the differences of the colonised from the imperial centre. Postcolonial literature is also built around the concept of resistance on the part of the colonised. It carries themes of resistance about human freedom, identity, individuality and more. According to Aboulela, these themes of identity and resistance are embedded within Islamic principles but not as they are in their present form. Rae speaks of 'extremist' groups,

> 'They are shooting themselves in the foot. There is no recourse in the *sharia* for what they're doing, however much they try and justify themselves.'[197]

The narrative attempts to defend the Islamic nation against the aggression of colonialism, neo-colonialism and Islamic fundamentalism, by concentrating on socio-religious values, which stem from Islamic doctrines. Fanon explains this point in *The Wretched of the Earth*,

> We know that the majority of Arab territories have been under colonial domination. Colonialism has made the same effort in these regions to plant deep in the minds of the native population the idea that before the advent of colonialism their history was one which was dominated by barbarism. The struggle for national liberty has been accompanied by a cultural phenomenon

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[196] *The Translator*, 168
[197] *The Translator*, 24

> known by the name of the awakening of Islam. The passion with which contemporary Arab writers remind their people of the great pages of their history is a reply to the lies told by the occupying power.[198]

However, Aboulela does not attempt to remind Arabs of their great history. She concentrates on the relationship between Islam and the West and the great doctrines of Islamic religion. She uses Islamic history and values to reply to the lies spread in the West such as the view that Muslims are 'uncivilised,' 'barbaric,' and with no human values. In many references throughout the text, the novelist reinforces an essentially positive image of Islam as a force for social justice and liberation. The narrator says, 'She [Sammar] thought of how Allah's *sharia* was kinder and more balanced than the rules people set up for themselves.'[199]

Sammar discusses with Rae a *hadith* that she has come across in Scotland, suggesting that one does not have to be in a Muslim country to learn about Islam. The West is a place where one can learn not only Western values but Islamic ones too. She quotes the *hadith*: 'The best jihad is when a person speaks the truth before a tyrant leader.'[200] The novelist employs this hadith to correct Western understanding of jihad as a 'terrorist' and fundamentalist Islamic institution employed to fight the West. She suggests that jihad, contrary to what is perceived in the media, is a noble and righteous act if used in an Islamic way.

In order to challenge Western prejudices and misconceptions about Islam, Aboulela creates Rae's character in *The Translator*. Rae, with his good understanding of Islam and the Arab World, is invented to function as a reversal to Western beliefs

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[198] Fanon, 1963: 171-72
[199] *The Translator*: 61
[200] ibid: 96

concerning Islamic values, by acknowledging the good nature of Muslims. Rae was interested in Islam ever since he was a child. In school, he wrote an article called 'Islam is better than Christianity' influenced by his uncle who went to Egypt with the British army during the Second World War and converted to Islam there. The title of this essay is loaded with suggestions and implications. It suggests religious hierarchy suggesting that Muslims are 'better' than Christians. Rae becomes a scholar in postcolonial theory and Islamic studies. He learns a lot about Islam as a religion, studying it carefully that he becomes aware of all its minute details. Yet he manages to separate his own identity and objectivity from what he knows and reads. His admiration for the Arab World is due to the fact that it is his field of study and because of his numerous visits to the region. Rae, in the narrative, becomes the 'perfect' character to combine East and West, teaching the Western reader about Islam and the Arab nation. He says,

> 'The good thing,' he said, 'the balance is that you could know, that the information is there. Governments come and go and they can aggressively secularise like Turkey, where they wiped Islam off the whole curriculum, or marginalise it like they did most everywhere else, separating it from other subjects, from history even. But the Qur'an itself and the authentic *hadiths* have never been tampered with. They are there as they had been for centuries. This was the first thing that struck me when I began to study Islam, one of the reasons I admire it.'[201]

Because of the two characters, Rae and Sammar, *The Translator* has been described as 'a dialogue of civilisations.'[202] Rae as a British man represents the West, and Sammar as an Arab Muslim woman represents the Muslim East, and their love relationship is supposed to govern and carry out this dialogue of reconciliation. Rae, however, is stereotypical as he is the image of the 'ideal' Westerner. He understands

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[201] ibid: 97
[202] See Hosny, 2002

Islam and defends it and appreciates the Arab World and its traditions and defends them. He does not consume alcohol and he even looks like a Turk or Persian. These implausible characteristics make Rae an artificial character constructed for the purpose of achieving the ideal coloniser subject for the purpose of reconciliation.

Although Rae functions as a tool to link both cultures, it is unrealistic and artificial to describe the novel as a 'dialogue' simply because of their love relationship. For a dialogue to be carried out it needs at least two parties with certain opinions and beliefs. The dialogue in *The Translator* is one-sided with one opinion repeating itself in a didactic manner.

Sammar took the responsibility of educating the reader about Islam and the Arab World. Rae took the role of confirming Sammar's beliefs and teachings, elaborating and explaining them from an 'expert's' point of view. Yasmin, although born and brought up in Britain, is full of prejudices against the West. Hence, the only obvious voice is Islam. So where is the dialogue? If it were a religious dialogue, the reader would expect another religion to be involved, and if it were a cultural dialogue, the reader would expect another culture to be involved. Although most of the novel is set in Britain, one cannot fail to notice that it focuses almost entirely on one subject: Islam.

Spivak argues that when colonial discourse concentrates on the representation of the colonised or the matters of the colonies, it serves the production of neo-colonial knowledge by placing colonialism/imperialism in the past.[203] Aboulela's portrayal of

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[203] Morton, 2003: 123

Rae and the portrayal of Western culture is too simplistic to serve the purpose of the novel. Even when she creates a character of an Orientalist, Rae, she makes him a good one disregarding the bad connotations of the term. The narrator says,

> 'Sammar did not like the word orientalist. Orientalists were bad people who distorted the image of the Arabs and Islam. Something from school history or literature, she could not remember. Maybe modern orientalists were different.'[204]

This is a too simplistic interpretation of the term. The novelist disregards and seems apologetic to Edward Said's statement that Orientalists have a political vision of reality whose structure promotes that difference between the familiar (West) and the strange (East). This vision created and then served the two visualized worlds; Orientals lived in their world and 'we' lived in ours.[205] Rae is an Orientalist, who travels around the Arab World, has professional political views concerning East and West. Because of his experience, he is not surprised by anything Sammar says to him about her part of the world.

He is the 'good Orientalist,' as Sammar says, because he never demonstrates a residual fear of Islam, nor aggression towards Islamic societies, which is demonstrated by the title of his book *The Illusion of an Islamic Threat*. He looks like Arabs and behaves like them too. Sammar tells Yasmin, 'He's sort of familiar, like people from back home.'[206] Rae also defends Islam and the Islamic world against misunderstanding the religion. He calls for an end to the illusion that Islam is a threat to the Western civilisation. Rae says that it is,

> '....not the biggest threat facing the Western world. If we look at real terrorist damage, Muslim extremists have caused much less

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[204] *The Translator*, 19
[205] Said, 1995 (1978):43-4
[206] The Translator, 19

than the IRA, the Red Brigade, the Baader-Meinhof gang, the Basque separatists ETA.....'[207]

Aboulela, through Rae's and Sammar's characters and their dialogues, exposes Islam, praises it and shows its significance to Arabs and the rest of the world. The narrative claims that Islam is the only way towards safety and security, and it is the only religion that makes people stronger. Sammar tells Rae: 'It [Islam] would be good for you, it will make you stronger.'[208] The novel does not show why Rae needs to be stronger in the first place, stronger from what, for what purpose and how Islam would help him to attain this strength.

The narrative claims Muslims' superiority because of the Islamic faith, and on many occasions, adopts the coloniser's thesis that 'we are the best.' It shows that Muslims have privilege over Europeans whether Christian or secular. Sammar explains to Rea the difference between the Qur'an and the *Sunna*, when it would be thought that an expert on Islam would already know such a significant detail. She continuously emphasises Arabic religious terms such as *Allah, hijab, masjid, maghrib, and masha' Allah* indicating differences stemming out of religion.

In postcolonial writing, using untranslated words is a common device on the author's part to convey a sense of cultural distinctiveness. Aboulela's constant usage of the word '*Allah*,' for example, is an act to signify the difference between cultures and to illustrate the importance of religious discourse in interpreting the Arab culture. This device indicates a gap that the narrative does not try to bridge nor compromise in the reconciliatory dialogue. Ashcroft et al suggest that cultural difference is not inherent

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[207] ibid: 30-1
[208] ibid: 79

in the text but is inserted by untranslated words. This device can be seen as a political act that does not give the receptive culture the translated word and therefore the higher status.[209] He continues,

> The absence of explanation is, therefore, first a sign of distinctiveness, though it merely makes explicit that alterity which is implicit in the gloss. More importantly, it is an endorsement of the facility of the discourse situation, a recognition that the message event, the 'scene of the Word' has full authority in the process of cultural and linguistic intersection.[210]

This theme of the colonised acting superior is also demonstrated in 'The Museum' in *Coloured Lights*. Shadia, the main character in 'The Museum' undertakes the role of the coloniser by stereotyping Bryan, a fellow British student. Shadia judges him and treats him like an enemy revealing his misfortunes arrogantly to indicate that she is far better than he is. The narrative reveals an 'odd' Western man and an Eastern woman who takes advantage and profits from him in the classroom and outside it. In her childish ways, Shadia tries to convince herself and Bryan that she is superior in everything; country (the Nile is superior to the Dee), manners (she is well mannered and better brought up), religion (source of safety to individuals), and family of origin (she comes from an upper-class). She is struck by his Western style with his long hair and silver earring. She criticises him and his culture and makes both inferior to her: 'She [Shadia] spoke English better than him!,'[211] '*She had manners. She was well brought up.*'[212] 'My father,' she says proudly, 'is a doctor, a specialist,'[213] and 'my mother,' she blew the truth out of proportion, 'comes from a very big family. A

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[209] Ashcrot at al, 1989: 66

[210] ibid: 65
[211] *Coloured Lights*, 102
[212] ibid: 105
[213] ibid: 110

ruling family. If you British hadn't colonised us, my mother would have been a princess now.'[214]

Bryan is thought of as 'immature,' 'silly' and a 'gullible boy.' He cuts his hair and takes off his earring to make Shadia happy, but she considers him an idiot for doing so. He calls her princess, shows interest in her religion, and behaves modestly with her. Yet Shadia does not see him in anyway other than a coloniser, a threat to her national and religious identity, a man with blue eyes and a mistake to talk to, as she says. This is an attempt for the suppressed to suppress, and the suppressor to pay back. Bryan says, 'Ma' dad's a joiner.'... Shadia thinks to herself, 'Fareed [Shadia's fiancé] hired people like that to work on the house. Ordered them about.'[215]

Shadia thought seeing Bryan is a mistake. She considers herself a traitor when she speaks to him. She wants him to hate her and to stay away from her so she can be able to justify her prejudices against him. She says, 'in the West they hate Islam,'[216] and 'Europeans had different rules, reduced, abrupt customs.'[217] Seeing Bryan made her feel lost and insecure. Shadia suppresses her feelings by returning to her roots and traditions in order to fight any foreign influence she might get from him.

In *The Translator*, however, the roots of the heroine are marginalised as they are portrayed on many occasions to be 'uncivilised' and 'inferior' echoing Western discourse of the Other. The narrative is very contradictory in its themes. It sets out to show the superiority of Islam but fails drastically to elevate the culture that practices

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[214] ibid: 110
[215] ibid: 109
[216] ibid: 112
[217] ibid: 113

it. On many occasions the narrator compares Britain and the Sudan and in each time reinforces the superiority of the former and the inferiority of the latter. This is evident in the images the novelist chooses to portray of Britain and the Sudan, which will be the focus of the following section.

3.3 Representations of Home and Exile

Postcolonial literature focuses on travel from the homeland to the coloniser's land. Travelling is an initiation towards the process of hybridity where cultures merge, compete and conflict. In 'The Bitstream of Babylon' Ella Shohat points out that the resulting mixture of different values causes confusion and clarity, contest and collaboration, enrichment and impoverishment. She continues,

> Postcolonial theory has privileged the figure of the traveller, the diasporic, the hybrid, the exile as a destabilizer or fixed centres. Since the very definition of house, home, and homeland requires a boundary, whether that is a fence, a wall, or a border, the metaphors of fluidity in diaspora and postcolonial discourses express the critique of a fixed notion of identity. If the concept of the third world was about generating an intellectual and political home for colonized nations, the postcolonial, I would argue, is about generating a home for displacements in the wake of such decolonisation. And while the third worldist discourse suppressed diversity, conflicts, and "minority" perspectives within "the nation" in order to chart a homogenous anticolonial master narrative, the postcolonial has tended to privilege diasporic, migrant, nomadic identities, where access to power among those wandering, and their relation to their nation state of origin and destination, have been obscured.'[218]

Aboulela's narratives represent, as postcolonial literature usually does, an attempt by a 'Third World' subject to produce a work of literature in the language and the setting of the coloniser. This results in demonstrating opposite sentiments of the colonised and the language used by the writer. These sentiments are usually revealed in the

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[218] Shohat, 1999: 225

representations used in the novelist's depiction of the homeland and the coloniser's land. Postcolonial literature often reveals and transforms the existence of the colonised subject from a local familiar experience to an 'alien' foreign one. This act cannot but be influenced by the culture of the coloniser despite injecting the local culture into the style, discourses and experiences of the foreign language.

The starting point of people's identities is often located in their childhood or family. Home is usually considered the starting point of describing their identity, as it is the place where it all began. To many, home represents safety and security and to others danger and risk. In both cases, there is often nostalgia attached to it. This nostalgia is often placed in literature, because with its literary styles and modes of expression it expresses sentiments that are usually more spontaneous and sincere. In fiction or poetry, home is usually romanticised. The desire to return home suggests a need to stabilize one's identity and attain security when it is compromised by another location.

In *Understanding Identity* Kath Woodward suggests that there are two dimensions to home. First, there is the geographical, territorial dimension and second, there is the private domestic arena of home. She describes home as the place and the journey we take to achieve the homecoming. Therefore, home combines the meanings that are attached to the place a person comes from and the desire to return even if this desire is unlikely to be accomplished. This desire to return always shapes the present and the ways in which people reconstruct and negotiate their identities. She continues,

> Home is about belonging and about imagining the place that we call home, but there is also a very strong sense of longing as well as belonging, of a powerful desire to lay claim to an identity that is placed and grounded, as well as imagined. The desire to

> belong may be part of the process of the imagination, but there may be more to the experience of longing than temporary, imaginative construction of continuity in the attempt to make up a place called 'home.' There is a longing to belong and home can be what offers the means of satisfying this need.[219]

In *The Translator*, the definition of home fluctuates at each stage of Sammar's life. She was born in Britain and lived there until the age of seven. During her childhood in Britain, she did not understand what home meant. Sammar says, 'Home was a vague place, a jumble of what her mother said about it. Home was a grey and white place like in the photographs of her cousins which arrived air mail.'[220] Her parents knew where they belong, but not the child who has never seen her parents' homeland. But later, as Sammar grows up in Sudan with her family and relatives, Sudan becomes her only home.

Throughout the novel Sammar, as an adult and a widow living in Scotland, longs for a 'home.' Scotland is transformed after the death of her husband into a place of exile. Her sense of security was fragile, which made her search for another 'home.' It was Sammar's turn after the death of Tarig to tell her child that they are going 'home.' The child, however, is too young to understand what it means, as Sammar says, 'to dissolve in Africa's sand.' After the death of her husband, Sammar returns to Sudan, but is disappointed as she still feels exiled. She returns to Scotland, where she also feels the alienation. Sammar's longing for a home is not geographical but emotional. In a way, neither Sudan nor Scotland is her home anymore because both places do not give her the sense of security, marked and identified by a husband. During her stay in Scotland, she lives in a place that she often refers to as 'a room' or 'the hospital

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[219] Woodward: 2002: 51

[220] *The Translator*, 40

room.' In her description, this place suggests sickness and disease caused by the displacement she feels. There is nothing hung on the wall, no pictures, nothing personal that indicates any sense of life there. It is her exile.

Exile suggests a painful or penalizing expulsion from the homeland. Though it can be either voluntary or involuntary, internal or external, exile generally implies a fact of trauma, an imminent danger. It is usually political that the home is no longer safely habitable. Hamid Naficy in 'Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place' suggests that exile is not caused by political reasons only. He argues that there are modalities of placement and displacement,

> Today, it is possible to be exiled in place, that is, to be at home and to long for other places and other times so vividly portrayed in the media. It is possible to be in internal exile and yet be at home. It is possible to be forced into external exile and be unable to, or wish not to, return home. It is possible to return and to find that one's house is not the home that one had hoped for, that is not the structure that memory built. It is possible to be able to return and choose not to do so, but instead continue to dream of and imagine a glorious return. It is also possible to transit back and forth, be in and out, go here and there-to be a nomad and yet be in exile everywhere.[221]

Sammar tries to create a home for herself. In Scotland she remembers Sudan, 'she was heavy with other loyalties, full to the brim with the distant places, voices in a language that was not his [Rae] own.'[222] However, as her relationship with Rae develops, she develops a sense of emotional security and satisfaction in his homeland. It is only because of Rae that she finally realises that she has been neglecting herself. She says, 'I am not like this. I am better than this.'[223] In an effort to return to her 'true' self, putting the past behind her, she puts her belongings in bags just like when her

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[221] Naficy, 1999:3-4
[222] *The Translator*, 26
[223] ibid: 59

husband died, but this time without grief. 'At night she dreamt no longer of the past but of the rain and colours of his [Rae's] city. She dreamt of the present.'[224]

Sammar's sudden sense of security and belonging are triggered by the new male figure in her life. Her emotions for him made her identify herself with him and his homeland. The narrator says, 'In Rae's house, Sammar felt the sense of home with its Islamic pictures, pictures of his daughter. Everything there seemed to be warm and flowery and on top of all that Rae's voice.'[225] But this feeling is not triggered by Rae's house in the literal sense. Her emotions make her feel the warmth amidst the cold city and his voice gave her the security she needs. Naficy distinguishes between 'house' and 'home,' he says,

> *House* is the literal object, the material place in which one lives, and it involves legal categories of rights, property, and possession and their opposites. *Home* is anyplace; it is temporary and it is moveable; it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory and by acts of imagination. Exiles locate themselves vis-à-vis their houses and homes synesthetically and synecdochically. Sometimes a small gesture or body posture, a particular gleam in the eye, or a smell, a sound, or a taste suddenly and directly sutures one to a former house or home and to cherished memories of childhood.[226]

Rae's home makes Sammar feel secure. She feels that it somehow resembles the home she would have had in Sudan because of the Islamic pictures and all the journals and magazines he owns about the Islamic/Arab World. East and West meet in Rae's home, he makes her feel protected and sheltered in a culture Sammar once felt alienated from. Among the magazines in Rae's house she finds one that had pictures of different world maps. When she leans down to take a look at it, she marks the flow of the Nile. She locates the life that she has been exiled from. She reads the familiar

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[224] ibid: 61
[225] ibid: 17
[226] Naficy, 1999: 15

names of towns and identifies herself with them. Sammar remembers the sunshine and the poverty.

Maps have a political purpose in drawing the boundaries of nations. They also provide people the means to produce and construct their identities, by recalling journeys that have had a particular influence on the identities that they seek to reproduce. Sammar recognises the names of countries and cities, some she has been to and others not. This geographical mapping helps her to know and understand where she was and where she is now, and, therefore, to identify herself with her surroundings accordingly. Woodward notes,

> Once that knowledge is mapped it becomes subject to codes and regulations, and in this way mapping the self goes further than retelling the story and producing narrative accounts of identity. Maps represent another way of attempting to pin down identity, to structure what matters by picking out the key places, the main links and attempting to secure them. Maps chart what matters, where we have been and where we are going.'[227]

The map in the novel is described ironically to show continents incorrect in their proportion to one another. Europe appeared bigger than South America, Greenland was larger than China, and Britain, the colonising power, 'a rosy insignificance' while Africa was massive.[228] Graham Huggan in 'Decolonizing the Map' points out,

> The prevalence of the map topos in contemporary post-colonial literary texts, and the frequency of its ironic and/or parodic usage in these texts, suggests a link between a de/reconstructive reading of maps and revisioning of the history of European colonialism.[229]

Sammar sees an advertisement for educational material in Rae's magazine. When she sees schoolgirls wearing school uniform, her memory takes her back to her days at

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[227] Woodward, 2002:67-8
[228]. *The Translator*: 15
[229] Huggan, 1995: 407

school. Rae in the meantime watches her kindly, so she feels encouraged to tell him or to share with him a memory from her former home. She says, 'I used to wear a uniform like that in secondary school.'[230] She sees her home and her past balancing at Rae's house.

However, there are many contradictions in the novel regarding 'home.' Sometimes the Sudan is presented as a backward place that Sammar does not want to return to, and other times it is represented as a beautiful country where she is keen to be especially towards the end of the novel. Sammar is aware of the misfortunes of her country. Sometimes, however, she tends to be in favour of Scotland because as suggested in the novel it is more 'civilised,' cultured, sophisticated and, of course because it is Rae's homeland. For example, when she compares between the stray cats of Khartoum and Rae's cat, she suggests the savageness of the East and the cleanliness and civilised manners of the West in the form of cats. The narrator says,

> Sammar was wary of cats. When she was young stray cats had sneaked indoors and shocked her by jumping out of cupboards or from underneath the stairs. They were savage cats, their ribs visible against matted, dirty fur. Some had a black hole instead of an eye, some had stumpy legs, amputated tails.... Rae's cat was slow and wellfed. She walked, glossy and serene, around the room.[231]

The writer compares between East and West throughout the novel. Again with the same suggestion of the West is a civilised place whereas the East is not. Scotland is the place of polite rules and signs, where everything is labelled, whereas the Sudan has the image of dust, barking dogs, power cuts and disease. She also mentions the

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[230] *The Translator*: 16
[231] ibid: 13

culture shock that she had to experience on meeting the refined, cultured people of Scotland, as opposed to the 'low standards' of the Sudanese. The narrator says,

> 'Culture shock for Sammar. An old man in Edinburgh was allowing his daughter's ex-husband under his roof. This must be civilised behaviour, an 'amicable divorce'. Where she comes from, the divorced spouse was one who 'turned out to be a son of a dog' or 'she turned out to be mad' and were treated as such. No one 'stayed friends', no one stayed on talking terms.'[232]

Sammar's decision to return to the Sudan is a result of Rae's rejection of her marriage proposal rather than her longing for her homeland and son. If Rae had accepted her marriage proposal, she would have stayed in Aberdeen with him. She starts to love and miss her homeland as an escape from Rae, an emotional escape with the hope that in Sudan she will forget him and find someone else; a man who is more suitable for her religious standards. Despite this, she feels as an exile at home, exiled from him as she is not able to talk to him or talk of him to people who never knew him.

Again, she resorts to religion as the only way for her to survive the traumas in her life. She convinces herself that it would have never worked out between Rae and herself due to the religious and cultural differences they encountered. Although she is deprived of his company, she realises that she must start a new life with the help of her strong beliefs. While she is in Sudan, Rae's image haunts her throughout her daily life and in her dreams. Her religious and house duties do not help her in this regard as she has hoped. They did help her, however, in realising that Rae should convert out of his own belief and for his own sake, not as a hypocritical rationalisation for their marriage.

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[232] ibid: 34

The theme of 'West is more civilised than East' is demonstrated in Aboulela's short stories too. In 'Coloured Lights' for example, the protagonist describes how a variety of coloured lights can be so beautiful and glamorous in Scotland but destructive and fatal in Sudan. The short story begins with the protagonist crying because she feels homesick. While she cries on a bus she meets an Indian conductor with whom she identifies herself because of their skin colour. She describes the difference between the English word 'homesick' and its equivalent in Arabic. She notes that the Arabic language does not have an exact equivalent word but instead expresses the feeling in ways such as 'yearning for homeland' or 'sorrow of alienation.' She feels that these expressions accurately describe her condition as she felt alienated from Britain and its people more than nostalgic for her homeland.

The protagonist, whose name is not mentioned in the story, works in London as an Arabic broadcaster at the BBC. She is Sudanese; her husband works in Kuwait as a vet. Her daughters are in Sudan with their relatives. Both parents choose to be in different countries so they can find better job opportunities to support their family. She claims that it is the fate of her generation to be separated from their country and family to find the work that they cannot find at home because of the bad conditions there.

The festive December lights in the city reminded her of her brother Taha. Back in Sudan, they had coloured lights decorating the house for his wedding. Only those lights did not shine on that day as they were supposed to. The wedding turned into Taha's funeral. It was electricity that killed him; his own wedding lights caused his death. The coloured lights, in Scotland, seemed to her cheerful but yet false, because

of a tragic memory in her past. The protagonist suggests that such an incident would not happen in Scotland because it is a 'superior' and a 'civilised' place. She feels embarrassed of the terrible situation in Sudan, or perhaps its 'inferiority,' and the uncivilised behaviour of its people. The protagonist says,

> I had been in London for nearly seven months and I told no one about Taha. I felt that it would be distasteful or like a bad joke, but electricity had killed others in Khartoum too, though I did not know them personally. A young boy once urinated at the foot of a lamp light which had a base from which wires stuck out, exposed. A young girl in my school was cleaning the fridge, squatting barefoot in a puddle of melted ice with the electric socket too close.[233]

The characters in Aboulela's fiction, seem sometimes disgraced by their own culture and its people, suggesting that the West should be the standard of what is considered 'good' and 'bad.' The narrator in *The Translator* describes the chaos in Scotland whilst it is snowing, 'there was sunshine like in Africa and the city slowed down, became inefficient, as if it were part of the Third World.'[234] In 'The Ostrich,' the protagonist laments her inferiority in front of Europeans, 'Strangers I must respect, strangers who were better than me. This is what Majdy says. Everyone of them is better than us.'[235]

Many might agree with the novelist suggesting that she is presenting a 'true' picture of life in Sudan. Others might think that there must be something pleasant worth saying about one's homeland amidst all the bad conditions in which people live. Aboulela, however, demonstrates in her narratives that despite the claims that the East is 'backward' and 'uncivilised,' it is better than the feeling of alienation. Although the characters realise the misfortunes of their country, they still long for it, still want to

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[233] *Coloured Lights*, 7
[234] *The Translator*, 107
[235] *Coloured Lights*, 45

live among their own people preferring it to the civilised Empire that makes them feel alienated and estranged.

The Translator demonstrates the Westerner's alienation when he travels to an Arab nation. Rae travels to Morocco at an early stage of his life. There, unlike Britain, people are not concerned with his foreignness, but Rae, as he arrives with Moroccan workers coming from France and Spain to the harbour, feels wretched and, in awe. He felt stale, unclean and full to the brim with the colonial past. The narrator says,

> 'A pattern was set from that first time. In years to come, every arrival to Africa was similarly accompanied by loss or pain, a blow to his pride. Baggage disappearing, nights spent in quarantine, stolen traveller's cheques. As if from him the continent demanded a forfeit, a repayment of debts from the ghosts of the past.'[236]

Ironically, in Morocco, it was not the locals who rejected him, but the expatriate community. The narrative claims that Rae was disliked as he is similar to Arabs in appearance, straightforwardness, and secretiveness. Rae ends up marrying Amelia who is half British and half Spanish. He falls in love with her because she is exotic as she is half Spanish, spoke English with a lilt, and her parents disapproved of him. She was attracted to him, however, because he looked and behaved like an Arab, something she wanted for years and yet was prohibited from having.

Rae describes the setting in Morocco as one that had a colonial air. Foreigners, by the pool, were the superior, the well off and the privileged. The locals were the waiters who waited on them, looking inferior and wretched, and just like Rae, fully dressed. But Rae looks down on the locals, because they are pathetic, hypocrites, and more

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[236] *The Translator*, 48

importantly because they are powerless and helpless to change the colonial situation they live in. The narrator says,

> 'The waiters. The thought was about the waiters. Their women were covered, seldom glimpsed, while they earned their living from serving iced lemonade to pool-side beauties. In the evening they mixed cocktails, sliced lemons for the water-coloured gin, poured whisky, when alcohol was forbidden to them. That is why, Rae said to Amelia, they had shifty eyes, pathetic giggles, why they went home everyday and beat their children up.'[237]

Another concern with home and exile is the interaction of language, history and environment with the 'alien' or the local culture. Those who move from their countries to the coloniser's land feel the sense of displacement from the coloniser's language. Postcolonial literature locates the gap between the experience of the place and the language available to describe it. The gap occurs for those who consider their language inadequate to describe the new place that they have settled in, or for those whose language has been destroyed by enslavement and became unprivileged by the imposition of the language of the colonising power. In both cases, the alienation is inevitable.[238]

This sense of displacement is the lack of correspondence between language and place. The sense of dislocation from the historical homeland creates tension within any language, as it becomes the hybrid voice for both the coloniser and the colonised to describe displacement as well as radical Otherness. In *Colonial Desire* Robert Young points out,

> Pidgin and creolised languages constitute powerful models because they preserve the real historical forms of cultural contact. The structure of pidgin – crudely the vocabulary of one language superimposed on the grammar of another – suggests a

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[237] ibid: 53
[238] Ashcroft, 1989: 10

> different model from that of a straightforward power relation of dominance colonizer over colonized. Today this structural device is often repeated in novels in English so that the vernacular idiom tacitly decomposes the authority of the metropolitan form.[239]

The colonised, in Aboulela's fiction, are hybrid voices connecting between two cultures and two languages. Woodward quotes Stuarts Hall's definition of hybrid and diasporic identities as,

> They are people who belong to more than one, speak more than one language (literally or metaphorically); inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home; who have learned to 'negotiate and translate' between cultures, and who… have learned to live with, and indeed to speak from difference. They speak from the in-between of different cultures, always unsettling the assumption of one culture from the perspective of the other, and thus finding ways of being both the same as and different from the others amongst which they live, of course, such people bear the marks of the particular cultures, languages, histories and traditions which 'formed' them…[240]

The Arabic language appears clearly in the religious words used by the novelist, indicating that the most significant distinction that creates a gap between Arabic and English is Islam. There is a lot of emphasis, however, on the fact that the protagonists in the narratives speak English fluently. In *The Translator,* for example, the narrator constantly reminds the reader of Sammar's ability to speak English and the advantages that this ability gives her. She benefits from this ability as it is a requirement for her job as a translator, the medium to introduce Islamic terms and principles to other characters and to the reader, and also as the mediator between her and Rae. By speaking English, however, she feels equal to the coloniser. This is also revealed in some of the short stories. In 'The Museum,' the narrator makes Shadia

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[239] Young, 1995: 5
[240] Woodward, 2002: 63

superior to the British because she speaks better English. She says, 'She [Shadia] spoke English better than him [Bryan]! How pathetic. The whole of him was pathetic.'[241]

Stephen Morton cites Spivak as she points out that the correct understanding of English is derived from the political consciousness of the state of violence and oppression, rather than a privileged education in English semantics.[242] The narrator of 'The Museum' also stresses the advantages that the upper-class in Sudan has by being exposed to Western media. The narrator says, 'She [Shadia] had grown up listening to the proper English of the BBC World Service only to come to Britain and find people saying 'yes' like it was said back home in Arabic, *aye*.'[243]

The Translator also demonstrates and acknowledges the superiority of the English language over Arabic on many occasions. Mahasen tells Sammar when she shows interest in a marriage proposal,

> *'An educated girl like you, you know English...you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage.'* [244]

This quote indicates that people who speak English are privileged. While the novel already suggests, as it has been explained previously, that Muslims are 'superior,' it also indicates that the knowledge of a developed culture and its language makes the Muslim individual even more 'superior.' Unfortunately, this suggestion echoes colonial discourse of dichotomies and reinforces the perception of distance between

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[241] *Coloured Lights*, 102
[242] Morton, 2003: 133
[243] *Coloured Lights*, 109
[244] *The Translator*, 12 (Italics in original text)

the West and the Islamic World. It also overturns the reconciliation process and emphasises the current political and social conflicts between the two civilisations.

Fanon states, '[t]o speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.'[245] Colonisation gains victory when the colonised rejects his/her own identity and assimilates himself/herself into that of the coloniser. As soon as the colonised adopts the coloniser's values, they adopt the coloniser's criticism of their own self. Fanon explains that the colonised's belittling of his own culture elevates him 'above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.'[246] By strategically forgetting his/her language or adopting the coloniser's language, they are trying to forget the devalued world of their origin. However, it cannot be said that this is the case with the Arabic language. Although the Arab World has been significantly influenced by Western powers, the Arabic language is still the dominant language.

Through the novelist's contradictory representation of Scotland and the Sudan, and in suggesting the superiority of the coloniser's language, the attempt of reconciliation between Islam and West fails. Aboulela devalues the Muslim culture when she constructs her narrative in the first place to elevate it. She shows that Sudan is an uncivilised place when most of its population is Muslim, thereby, portraying the supposed backwardness of Muslim societies.

The novel is thought to accomplish its theme of reconciliation when Rae converts in the end. By his conversion, the narrative claims that the 'dialogue' and the

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[245] Fanon, 1967: 38
[246] ibid: 18

reconciliation have been carried out. He was detached from his field of study as he says at the beginning of the narrative, 'The reason why he [Fareed] goes on is that I view the Qur'an as a sacred text, the word of God. It would be impossible in the kind of work I'm doing, in the issue I'm addressing for me to do otherwise but accept Muslims.'[247] Towards the end of the narrative, he is 'saved' by Islam. He says, 'I found out at the end, that I didn't have anything to do with how much I've read or how many facts I've learned about Islam. Knowledge is necessary, that's true. But faith, it comes direct from Allah.'[248]

Characters form a significant part of Aboulela's narratives as they function as mouth-piece for the reconciliatory discourse. Aboulela fails to portray complex characters who would fit the complex reality of Muslims abroad and in their homelands. The next section will focus on female characters as they are represented in the narratives to demonstrate the strategies used by the novelist to portray Arab women in the West in the middle of religious and patriarchal discourses.

3.4 Female Characters as a Mouth-Piece

The question of identity in fiction is crucial. Identities of women writers and characters are necessarily gendered identities. To find a voice, and more importantly, to be heard, is essential for the development of a woman's autonomy. The Arab woman is represented almost always as a problematic figure who tries to bridge the gap between the socio-religious and modernity.

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[247] *The Translator*, 79
[248] ibid: 180

The Translator is a novel that attempts to reconcile the Western World with Islam. Some political events are mentioned, but they do not figure highly in the progress of events or the psychological makeup of the characters. The focus on Islam as the main representative of the East and of Eastern women cannot be missed.

The fact that the novelist employs female voices gives the narrative a certain accentuation. This accentuation is very vague and difficult to identify as the narrative is very shallow and contradictory. This section will focus on representations of Muslim women in Aboulela's works in an attempt to identify the strategies used by the novelist to join religion, Eastern values, and the West in the body of Muslim women. Sammar constitutes a major part of this representation as the narrative claims reconciliation through her and her relationship with Rae.

3.4.1 Sammar

Sammar's character strongly suggests a compromise on the emancipation of women for the sake of preserving the culture's religious identity. Sammar is very passive and submissive to all around her. The narrator describes her as being alienated from people and not able to identify herself with her surroundings in Aberdeen where she lives. The narrator starts with a dream Sammar has about not being able to hand in her work to Rae because of the bad weather. She is afraid of everything around her; the weather, the culture and people. When the weather is bad she would usually stay indoors watching people from the window doing what she could not do. Her passive ways denies her the 'normal' life she wishes for. Whether this is due to her husband's death or simply because this is the way she is the reader does not know. Although she

constantly complains about her way of living she does not attempt to change it. The narrator describes her life before meeting Rae,

> 'Four years ill in a hospital she made for herself. Ill, diseased with passivity, time in which she sat doing nothing. The whirlpool of grief sucking time. Hours flitting like minutes. Days in which the only thing she could arouse herself to do was pray the five prayers.'[249]

The only way Sammar attempts to cope with her husband's death is through practicing religion. Religion to her is the only way to be redeemed and saved from grief. She tries to cope by constant prayers and constant remembrance of God; such as saying, 'Only Allah is eternal. Only Allah is eternal.' She gathers all her husband's belongings and gives them to charity straight after his death. She wants to go home and finish with everything she and her son had in Scotland. She says, 'we're finished here, we're going to Africa's sand, to dissolve in Africa's sand.'[250] The word 'dissolve' which she uses constantly at the beginning of the narrative signifies a desire to suspend her life, which is exactly what she does in Scotland. The Sudan is not referred to as her home where she might best belong after such a trauma. Instead, it is the place in which she would 'dissolve.' She wants to disappear and melt in the soil to hide herself from her surroundings. In Sudan, she would not stand out like she does in Scotland because of her race and religion. She will not be different from others and she can rely on her family to support her and her four year old child. While in Scotland she is forced to be totally independent financially and emotionally. Being in Scotland did not seem to be a problem when her husband was alive, which illustrates that she is passive and terrified of being alone and taking responsibility for her decisions and actions.

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[249] ibid: 14
[250] ibid: 9

Sammar is also portrayed as selfish. This is mainly depicted in the way she treats her son after the death of her husband. She abandons her child and leaves him in Sudan for four years. This act does not mean anything to Sammar, as if he had never been part of her. She hated him as if the death of Tarig was his fault. 'Froth, ugly froth. She had said that to her son, 'I wish it was you instead. I hate you. I hate you.'[251]

For a mother to abandon her child like this and to wish for his death is something against social and ethical norms in any part of the world. It is more shocking coming from a 'religious' woman like herself, since Islam emphasises and elevates the role of mothers more than any other. She is in this case contradictory and hypocritical to the very same religious values she attempts to promote. She follows religion closely to cope with her husband's death and to justify re-marrying claiming that marriage is half the religion. She wants to re-marry a religious man assuming that he will take care of her as a widow. But she does not present Islamic doctrines on mother-child relationship and how religious and other social values would consider her behaviour towards him. Prophet Muhammad said, "Paradise is at the feet of mothers," which might be the best example of the reverence in Islam toward motherhood. To attempt to discuss Islam in a piece of fiction addressed to Western readers, one would think that issues that deals with human kind, spirituality and human rights would be the first on the novelist's agenda. To overcome stereotypes in the West regarding Muslims, it would be thought that themes discussed will be contradictory to those wrongly believed in the West. The mother-child relationship is a sacred one all around the world regardless of religious beliefs. When the narrative disregards this point, negates

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[251] ibid: 7

it and then claims religiousness, the reader automatically will think that Islamic values are not concerned with the most humane and sacred relationship, which in turn suggests that Islam is in fact oppressive and disgraceful. Therefore, it is very dangerous for a character such as Sammar's to be a representative of Muslim women in a world full of prejudices against Islamic values in general and Muslim women in particular.

It is important that women make their own choices and decide what they want to do in life. But here, Sammar does not decide her life only but also that of an infant whom she is responsible for. There is no argument against individuals having the freedom to choose their life style as long as they do not harm or infringe upon the rights of others. Sammar admires women for their ability and desire to sacrifice, to suffer and live for others. But she is only willing to sacrifice and live for a husband, not her son, whom she abandons for four years. Even when she imagines marrying Rae, she wants to take care of him and wishes to take care of his daughter, Mhairi, to please him. In her imagination of her new family, Amir, her son, seems so marginalised and irrelevant,

> 'She wanted to cook for him [Rae] different things, and then stand in the kitchen and think, I should change my clothes, wash, for her hair and clothes would be smelling of food. Mhairi could come and live with them, she would not need to go to boarding school anymore, and he would like that, seeing his daughter everyday, not having to drive to Edinburgh. And Mhairi would like Amir, girls her age liked younger children. She would be kind to Mhairi, she would do everything for her, clean her room, sort her school clothes. She would treat her like a princess.'[252]

The narrator, however, does not elaborate on the mother-child relationship in the text – as if it is of no importance – which is a weak point in the novel. It is therefore

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[252] ibid: 105-6

difficult to justify the mother's behaviour or to attack it. When Sammar decides to return to Sudan to see her child after abandoning him for four years, she takes it for granted that Amir would accept her again as a mother. She does not consider for one minute how her relationship with him would be like. When she is in Sudan she does not mention how she faced her son or how she felt towards him. Instead she portrays a somehow unconvincing normal mother-child relationship as if they were never apart. In fact everything seems to go well, which realistically should not be the case.

According to Sammar's way of thinking the son is replaceable while the husband is not. The only thing that gives meaning to her life is a husband; without him she is anxious, with no identity and motivation. By suggesting this, the author emphasises the stereotype that Muslim women are passive, docile, mastered and silent. Sammar contemplates,

> 'Tell him [Rae], she told herself, tell him of Mahasen and Tarig and Hanan. Mother, son, daughter. Tell him how you shrugged off your own family and attached yourself to them, the three of them. Made a gift of yourself, a child to be moulded…An obedient niece, letting Mahasen decide how you should dress, how you should fix your hair. You were happy with that, content…'[253]

Sammar's moments of self-doubt and inconsistency suggest that the continuity of patriarchal structures in her life help her to 'reassert' her identity. She is the 'modern' face of a woman who 'sees nothing, knows nothing and puts up with everything.' Sammar, as a character, is what Simone de Beauvoir condemns in *The Second Sex*:

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[253] ibid: 6-7

'A woman is non-existent without a master. Without a master, she is a scattered bouquet.'[254]

This image is portrayed in several parts of the narrative especially in describing polygamous marital structures and the obvious approval by the heroine. Polygámy, although sanctioned by Islamic doctrine, is considered something that is imposed upon most women.

After nine months of Tarig's death, Sammar tries to talk her aunt into accepting Ahmad Ali Yasseen's proposal for marriage to Sammar. Ahmad Ali Yasseen, is an elderly man who has two wives already and used to carry Sammar as a child. When her aunt refuses the idea in fury and tells her,

> '*Nine months have not yet passed, you want to get married again...and to whom? A semi-illiterate with two wives and children your age. I'll never give permission for something like this. From what sort of clay have you been made of? Explain to me. Explain what you think you're going to do...*' [255]

Sammar's reasons for marrying this man are unconvincing and selfish. She claims that because of his religiousness he would feel duty towards widows. Her aunt, struck by what she has heard, says, '*he can take his religiousness and build a mosque but keep away from us. In the past, widows needed protection, life is different now.*'[256]

Life *is* different now. Most modern Arab/Muslim women do not find satisfaction exclusively in the traditional role of wife and mother and if they did, it will not be

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[254] Simone de Beauvoir, 1997:653
[255] ibid: 21(italics in original text)
[256] ibid: 12 (italics in original text)

according to Sammar's definition of marriage and motherhood. Deprived of meaningful goals, Sammar makes it clear in her suggestion to marry Yasseen that she does not want to marry for love or find the right companion, but that she wants to marry for the sake of marriage and the dependency it entails. Again, the danger this particular character carries is that she reinstates the false stereotypes perceived in the West regarding Arab women. The narrative offers a simplistic way of answering prejudices against Arab women in the West. This of course reinstates the stereotype of Arab/Muslim women as passive and submissive. So the novelist emphasises what is already believed in the West rather than changing the image and stereotypes of Arab/Muslim women. Also instead of representing a 'better' image of Islam and the way it regards women, she attributes to the misunderstanding that already exists through claiming that Sammar's way of life is Islamic.

Sammar's education and, as the author claims, self-sufficiency, do not protect her from subordination to men and men's interpretations of the Qur'an. How can an educated woman accept to be humiliated by being one of two, three or four wives? Polygamy has a psychological impact that nobody can ignore. As Mernissi puts it,

> It enhances men's perception of themselves as primary sexual beings and emphasizes the sexual nature of the conjugal unit. Moreover, polygamy is a way for the man to humiliate the woman as a sexual being.'[257]

The narrative forgets to mention that polygamy has its special circumstances in Islam. Sammar does not mind the physical and emotional humiliation, and reveals to

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[257] Mernissi, 1975:48

importantly, it means security and passivity. The Qur'an in verse 4:129 says: 'you will never be able to do perfect justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire.' It is clear in this verse that men will never be fair to their wives even if they want to and therefore should not have more than one, unless there are special circumstances. But the novelist does not attempt to clarify what the West regards as oppressive and disgraceful in Islamic values. In her simplistic interpretation, she reinstates the misunderstanding and emphasises that these values as practiced are oppressive. So where is exactly the dialogue and the reconciliation in this narrative and does the novelist really attempt to correct Western misconception of Muslim women?

If the narrative claims to portray traditional women then Sammar's attitude towards marriage can also be considered as contrary to social norms in two incidents. Firstly, she practically offers herself to an elderly married man after a short time of being widowed, and secondly, when she proposes to Rae. She asks him to convert, even by only saying the *shahadah,*[258] so they could get married. After his refusal she feels humiliated,

> 'It occurred to her now that she had come to his office to ask him to marry her and he had not said yes. He had not said yes, and yet here she still sat, clinging. She had no pride. If she had pride she would go away now. Instead she was still sitting.'[259]

Again, here, she offers herself directly to Rae and neglects her pride, which is considered an important matter in Sammar's social standards. It is unusual for women from Sammar's background who are conscious about religious and social values to propose to men as it is considered to be the male's role. Her fear to tell

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[258] *Shahadah* is one of the five pillars of Islam, it is to witness that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God.
[259] *The Translator*, 114-5

Again, here, she offers herself directly to Rae and neglects her pride, which is considered an important matter in Sammar's social standards. It is unusual for women from Sammar's background who are conscious about religious and social values to propose to men as it is considered to be the male's role. Her fear to tell Yasmin and her other friends and relatives in Sudan about Rae illustrates her fear of how society would look upon her. So instead of depicting women as proud, dignified and self-righteous, as a reflection of one of their multiple realities, she portrays them as sexualised, material, docile and passive.

The novelist does not leave readers the chance to come to their own conclusions about Sammar's character. Instead, characteristics such as her inability to act on impulse is forced upon the reader. The novelist never really gives a full insight into Sammar's marriage to Tarig, except some memories from childhood. The narrative claims that it was a marriage based on gratitude, which does not fully explain why Sammar has chosen to abandon everything including her son when Tarig dies. Her marriage, like her motherhood, is not sufficiently described. The reader is left to wonder whether it was one based on love, familiarity, childhood dreams, gratitude or dependency on a man.

Sammar's claim that marriage is important in religion is not very convincing since motherhood is even more important and yet she disregards this fact. It is very hard to classify Sammar: her attitude is not modern, not religious and not cultural/traditional. The fact that she is educated and has a career, and therefore is capable of taking care of herself and her son, does not inspire her in any way to be self-reliant and to reject any humiliating act resulting from Tarig's death. She is portrayed as an indifferent

woman who is unwilling even to try to organise her life, to find her true identity, and to mother her son before she gets involved with a man.

3.4.2 Yasmin

Another major female character in *The Translator* is Yasmin, Rae's secretary and Sammar's friend. Her parents are from Pakistan but she was born and lived all her life in Britain. Yasmin represents the voice of the bitter colonised in the novel.

Living in a multicultural society, Yasmin feels compelled to examine her own identity being a member of a minority ethnic group. She identifies herself as someone different from the British people around her. Yasmin has a habit of making general statements starting with 'we' where she means the whole of the 'Third World' and its people. She emphasises binary oppositions like 'we' and 'them'. For example she says: 'We are not like them' or 'We have close family ties, not like them.' When she hears one of the secretaries in the department worried about her weight she says, 'Our children are dying of hunger while the rich count their calories!'[260] Yasmin, here, questions the ethics of her Other (the West) by her face-to-face encounter between the Self 'Third World' and the Other.

Through Yasmin's character, the novelist falls prey to the structure of dichotomies that she seeks to deconstruct and reconcile. One might argue that she might be performing this structure in the hope that the old structures will be altered by the 'Other' at some indeterminate point in the future, but there is little evidence in the narrative to support this claim. To reverse 'historically-determined patterns of

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[260] ibid: 10

violence' by allowing the subject to speak needs more complex characters and more elaborate themes than the ones portrayed by both Yasmin and Sammar. Both characters do not really speak for themselves as Eastern women, rather they articulate the material and cultural histories of the 'Third World' in a shallow and contradictory manner.

In addition to this, Yasmin's character seems to voice views that impose certain points of view about the West as if the reader is ignorant and cannot reach these interpretations and conclusions on his/her own. Yasmin's character is forced and artificial. The character is portrayed in the novel only to be the mouthpiece for 'Third-World' countries in a voice full of contempt for anything Western, which is really unrealistic considering that Yasmin lived all her life in the UK. If anyone, it should have been Sammar who made such statements, not Yasmin, bearing in mind that Sammar could not adapt to the Western lifestyle, thus, the reader would expect her to be the criticising voice. For this reason, Yasmin might be thought of as the 'dark side' of Sammar who speaks on her behalf. But again, the author does not give much detail about Yasmin's environment and the way she was brought up, which makes it difficult to explain her attitude or to justify it.

Yasmin, as a representative of the colonised people, has two dimensions in her behaviour, one with her 'own' people and the other with the whites. These two dimensions differ as they are a direct result of colonialism.[261] Yasmin refuses the colonial system and does not cross the boundaries between colonised and coloniser, as opposed to Sammar who claims that she is willing to cross the cultural boundaries

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[261] See Fanon, 1967

but not the religious ones. For Yasmin, Sammar is one of her 'own people,' and what connects them together is their religion. Throughout the novel, she expresses her irritation about Sammar's designs to marry Rae. She says,

> 'You're leaving in few weeks' time...if I were you, I'd avoid him like the plague till then. Go home and maybe you'll meet someone normal, someone Sudanese like yourself. Mixed couples just don't look right, they irritate everyone.'[262]

As far as Yasmin is concerned, a 'normal' person is a Muslim one and the rest of the world consists of abnormal people suggesting superiority of Muslims over others. This suggestion, again, echoes colonial discourse but in a reversed way. Whether 'everyone' in the above quote refers to Muslims, Westerners, or both, the reader does not know. In any case, however, it suggests that Yasmin's character is opposed to the reconciliation that the narrative is aiming at. Yasmin denies all Westerners objectivity and innocence, which is grounded on a colonial perspective. She says,

> 'That's his work, the field in which he is very highly thought of. But his interest, as far as I know, is just an academic interest.... That's the way they do research nowadays. It's a modern thing. Something to do with not being Eurocentric. They take what each culture says about itself. so they could study all sorts of sacred texts and be detached. They could have their own religious views or be atheists...'[263]

Yasmin is the voice for those who find the coloniser's culture intolerable. She says: '...someone like him is probably an agnostic if not an atheist. The whole of the department are atheists. These people are so left wing, "religion is the opium of the people" and all that.'[264]

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[262] *The Translator*, 83
[263] ibid: 83
[264] ibid: 82

Both Yasmin and Sammar try to be loyal to their communities, which is a matter emphasised and expressed strongly among ethnic and cultural minorities in the West. Their loyalty is portrayed by their religious commitments and their refusal of Western ideologies. This commitment is what sustains their relationship with their culture and saves them from any 'contaminated' Western effect. Alison Jaggar examines the possibility of global feminist dialogue especially between Western feminist communities and communities in the 'Third World' that are struggling to advance women's interests. She points out in 'Globalizing Feminist Ethics,'

> When belonging to a particular community is central to a member's sense of her own identity, the threat of expulsion is likely to loom extraordinarily large. Leaving the community may represent losing connection with the religious, moral, political, or cultural values that have given meaning to her life. It may represent losing her emotional home, her sense of belonging, her colleagues, comrades, friends and lovers. Such fears are especially intense for members of racial/ethnic and oppositional communities, because no comparable alternatives are likely to be available.[265]

3.4.3 Sumra

Aboulela's collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights*, is not different in its themes from *The Translator* as religion is the main focus in both. In 'The Ostrich' Sumra, which in Arabic means, 'dark skinned woman,' is a Sudanese woman living with her husband, who is doing a PhD, in London. Sumra is the best example of all Aboulela's characters that represents the double subordination of 'Third World' women. She represents women who suffer from two forms of colonisation: Western and patriarchal.

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[265] Jaggar, 2000: 10

Again, this character represents a passive 'Third World' woman. What makes her different from the other previous two characters, however, is that she exists in real life. She is a woman that one can see, meet and hear her story and believe it easily. Sumra is not full of contradictions and inconsistencies in her behaviour, however. Aboulela gives the reader the full image of the silenced and oppressed woman. She is the main voice in the novel; therefore her inner thoughts are laid out openly to the reader unlike Sammar's and Yasmin's.

Throughout the narration we listen to Sumra's voice contemplating her present and past life along with her conversations with her husband. The Ostrich is the nickname of a man in her past. She meets him and his bride, on her journey from Khartoum to Cairo, on her way back to London. While she goes on describing her university life in Sudan, where she had met him, she seems less passive than she is after marriage. She talks about him, about flirting with him, and about him flirting with her. This man represents home for her where she feels comfort and security. She says,

> 'We exclaim, we ask questions, no one was hurt, hardly anyone was in the room at the time. He [the ostrich] found it funny. Perhaps this is the essence of my country, what I miss most. Those everyday miracles, the poise between normality and chaos. The awe and the breathtaking gratitude for simple things. A place where people say Allah alone is eternal.'[266]

She has no desire to return to London and to her husband. She wishes she would stay where she belongs, where everything and everyone looks familiar to her. In her inner thoughts she did not mind if her husband divorces her if that was the only way for her to stay home. This feeling was intensified after meeting the Ostrich. He was somebody from the past, someone whom she identifies herself with. She feels that

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[266] *Coloured Lights*, 49

happiness and security are in Sudan where she belongs. During her journey back to London, she realises that the Ostrich represents the whole of Sudan. She says, 'and when the aeroplane took off again, I left the Ostrich and Africa behind me as I had done once before.'[267]

Sumra's husband represents displacement and exile. Majdy is the colonised who looks up to his coloniser in admiration. His inferiority complex makes him hate his own culture. He describes it as a 'backward' 'barbaric' place that nobody would like to live in claiming that even its own people are fleeing it. The husband is portrayed as a hypocrite. His image in the eyes of Western people is more important to him than anything else. 'Third World' people to whom he belongs are a disgrace, including his wife because she is the connection between him and his 'uncivilised' background.

We see Majdy taking on the role of the coloniser; he takes on his shoulders 'the burden of the white man' in order to civilise his wife. He tries to 'civilise' her by forcing her to abandon her 'Third World' principles. He wants both of them to leave their 'uncivilised' and 'inferior' background behind them and to adopt the Western 'civilised' way of life. Although he believes that he has managed to do so, his wife has not because she is more rooted to where she belongs. Majdy meets her at the airport and greets her by saying, 'You look like something from the Third World.'[268] Saying 'something' reveals a colonialist/imperialist discourse where Eastern subjects are 'things' to be manipulated and controlled with the right to exist only under Western rules. This might be, as Fanon suggests, due to the confusion of the native living in the coloniser's culture. The native would sometimes proudly declare that

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[267] ibid: 55
[268] ibid: 39

he/she speaks the coloniser's language and able to adopt their customs. Fanon notes that the native throws himself/herself greedily upon the Western culture 'like adopted children who only stop to investigate the new family framework at the moment when a minimum nucleus of security crystallizes in their psyche, the native intellectual will try to make European culture his own.'[269]

Through his relationship with Sumra, Majdy represents patriarchal oppression of women. He suppresses, neglects, and hits Sumra when she embarrasses him in front of his English friends. As far as he is concerned, what she thinks, wants and chooses is trivial. The narrator compares the Ostrich with Majdy throughout the narrative. They are two very different men. Majdy, who represents double colonisation and the life in the West, is arrogant, oppressive and considers religion a trivial matter. Whereas the Ostrich, who represents the colonised and life in Africa, is humble, gentle, confident and committed to his faith.

Such different attitudes of both men stem from differences in class and education. Leila Ahmed points out that class conflicts and economic interests cause political and ideological divisions. Colonised people are divided between those who look up to the West, the upper-class, and call for adopting Western ways to achieve personal and national advancement, and underprivileged class who are eager to preserve the Islamic and the national heritage against the ways of the infidel West.[270]

The underprivileged, who did not benefit from Western economic and political presence in the countries, had a different outlook on the coloniser's culture. So, while

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[269] Fanon, 1963:176
[270] Ahmed, 1992: 146-8

those who were trained in the West advanced and prospered, those less fortunate became disposed to reject and feel hostile towards the West. This feeling was attributed mainly to the economic unfairness and the legal privileges enjoyed by Westerners and Westernised men in colonised countries. The upper-class gained many benefits including economic and educational privileges out of colonialism. These men were educated in Western-type secular schools to become civil servants and the new intellectual elite. Or they have studied in the West and adopted a variety of Western views including modernity. So they called for transformations imported from the West to replace their religious and traditional ones, which were thought of as 'backward' and 'uncivilised.' Their interests were advanced by their affiliation with Western culture. This feeling is illustrated in Majdy's character,

> 'If I can find a way to live here forever, he says, if only I could get a work permit. I can't imagine I could go back, back to the petrol queue, computers that don't have electricity to work on or paper to print out. Teach dim-witted students who never held a calculator in their hands before. And a salary, a monthly salary that is less than what an unemployed person gets here in a week!'[271]

Majdy forces Sumra to take off her veil while living in London not because he believes in freedom of choice, but because he is worried about his image in front of Western people, as they might think that he has forced her to wear it. Her dress code should be her choice, but that does not concern him. He does not believe in the emancipation of women for the sake of it but for the sake of impressing and imitating the West. He also wants her to talk and behave in a modern Westernised way. His modernity is defined by the West. Every Western citizen is better than them, because, as he claims, they are more organised and disciplined.

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[271] *Coloured Lights*, 53

However, Majdy's character shows contradictions. After seeing him overwhelmed and influenced by the Western culture, he becomes nostalgic to his people. Fanon notes,

> In order to ensure his salvation and to escape from the supremacy of the white man's culture the native feels the need to turn backwards towards his unknown roots and to lose himself at whatever cost in his own barbarous people. Because he feels he is becoming estranged, that is to say because he feels he is living the haunt of contradictions which run the risk of being insurmountable…[272]

Although Majdy does not go as far as turning back to his 'unknown roots,' he does fall back upon emotional attitudes and develops a psychology dominated by sensitivity and susceptibility. Sumra contemplates,

> 'When I looked at him, he seemed weak and this made him look more beautiful than he had looked at the airport…. 'I work better when you are next to me' he was saying. 'It is easier to keep awake. When I saw you in the airport today, you brought back many memories to me. Of people I love and I've left behind, of what I once was years ago. I envy you because you are displaced and yet intact, unchanged while I question everything and I am not sure of anything anymore.'[273]

Sumra's sense of national belonging and identity is stronger than her husband's. This is the feeling that Sammar in *The Translator* also lacks. For both characters, cultural properties constitute who they are and contribute to their identities and their sense of belonging. Sammar's belonging is more to a man rather than a homeland. Whereas Sumra's belonging is more genuine, intact and consistent throughout the narrative. It is the culture, traditions, the language and the people to whom she belongs, and that constitutes her identity.

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[272] Fanon, 1963: 175
[273] *Coloured Lights*, 53

Throughout the novel and the collection of short stories, religious codes such as the veil, the Qur'an, and *shari'a* are used as ideological battlegrounds between East and West. The novelist very clearly writes for the Western reader to correct misconceptions against Arabs and Muslims. She attempts to answer back to the lies spread throughout the media against Islam and Muslims. But Aboulela also tries to write a novel that does not clash with her background as an Arab Muslim woman. Therefore, she writes a piece of fiction that does not sacrifice traditional and religious norms. She avoids and excludes the emotional side of her female characters and silences the female desire for freedom and equality indicating that this very same freedom and equality stand opposed to religious values. Her female characters are portrayed as followers and speakers on behalf of religion and patriarchal institutions thereby excluding references to what is considered a taboo in her cultural standards. Her female characters' behaviour, and especially Sammar's, is due to the oppressive and restrictive demands which Arab societies place on women. While the religious discourse of the narrative emphasises women's importance to the virtuous Muslim community, it dictates constricting rules for women's appropriate behaviour.

3.5 On Love and The '*Halal*' Fiction

Islamic religion calls for the emancipation of women and for gender equality. Women writers calling for the emancipation of women usually condemn their subjugation, but Aboulela's character, Sammar, celebrates it. As a woman, she feels that it is her duty to accept it and live with it. As the narrator and the heroine imply in their framework, women desire to be desired, for only then they can identify themselves as wives and mothers. After Rae refuses Sammar's marriage proposal, she laments,

> 'I]t is clear now, it is so clear, he does not love me enough, I am not beautiful enough. I am not feminine enough coming here to ask him to marry me when I should have waited to be asked.'[274]

According to Sammar, falling in love with a non-Muslim man is a sin. She denies herself human emotions, fulfilment and pleasure. Love is so systematic for her, either wrong or right with no compromises and no emotions. The narrative suggests that religion prevails over love and has more strength over human emotions and desires. The narrative also suggests that Sammar should not be susceptible to desire as it will probably contradict her religious beliefs and degrade her soul. After all, religious triumph is the main theme in the novel. The narrator says,

> 'His voice, and how heavy he is inside, heavy enough for me to sink in. All this will be forbidden to me? Where will I … she closed her eyes, banged her forehead against the wall.'[275]

She suppresses her feelings and silences herself as what she implicitly says is forbidden for her according to her cultural norms. She does not allow herself to show the reader her emotions, again because of her religious values that marks her identity. The narrator says,

> 'But idol's powers are not infinite. They cover a place, a particular community and a time. Sammar watched Reputation lose its muscle, its vigour, shrink and fizzle out in this remote corner of the world. When idol's fall, the path to the truth is uncluttered, clear. Who saw her, knew her, was with her all the time wherever she went?'[276]

In the above quote, Sammar refers to God as the ultimate power over human's and His doctrines should be the most authoritative and dominant. Through this notion of religious authority, the narrative explicitly denies women the right to express their

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[274] The Translator, 115
[275] ibid: 84
[276] ibid: 57

emotions and desires. The novelist silences the Muslim woman in her pious way of representing her. Sammar disappears through her parochial personality; her voice is not heard as the reader hears a voice that follows institutionalised beliefs rather than human. Sammar is simply a medium through which competing discourses represent their claims, desires and meanings.

There is no suggestion of Sammar having sexual desires towards Tarig or Rae, as if proper Muslim women do not have any sexual urges. This narrative demonstrates what has been noted in the previous chapter that expressing sexuality is frowned upon in the Arab World. Sammar's character is structured and defined according to the same religious and patriarchal structures that govern her.

For the above reasons, Ferial Ghazoul describes Aboulela's narratives as 'halal' fiction. She continues,

> Islamic-informed writing has contributed in recent years to rethinking such notions as resistance, modernity and gender, but it has rarely contributed anything that could be critically acclaimed to the literary scene. Leila Aboulela, a young Sudanese novelist, is setting the record straight. Her novel, *The Translator*, and short stories, *Coloured Lights* -- written in English and published in Scotland -- give a taste of what it is like to be a brilliant writer with a sophisticated commitment to an Islamic worldview. To say this does not mean that Aboulela deals only with 'Islamically correct' characters. There are pork eating and whiskey-drinking Muslims in her fiction; what makes her writing 'Islamic' is not religious correctness or didacticism. Rather, it is a certain narrative logic where faith and rituals become moving modes of living.[277]

To describe a piece of fiction as 'halal' is extreme in literary terms. It indicates that every thing should be measured in religious terms. The logic Ghazoul refers to in the

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[277] Ghazoul, 2001: 1

novel a moving mode of living is to have plausible characters, spontaneous themes and complexity of inner thoughts rather than didacticism about what is right and what is wrong.

Contrary to what Ghazoul believes, religious or nationalist discourse should not be the only legitimate mouthpiece for Arab women. Evelyne Accad argues in favour of the recognition of the deeply embedded sexual politics of nationalist struggles. She says that when arguments disregard sexuality, they are disregarding the basic needs in any culture, like food and sleep. Disregarding sexuality seems unfair because it disregards spiritual and psychological needs for love, affection and tenderness, which are intimately connected with sexuality. Accad points out,

> If women do not begin to see the necessity of dealing with issues of sexuality, more women will feel isolated, rejected and misunderstood, even within a group leading the same struggle. More will feel pushed to leave for other places, or simply drop out of political struggle, in the hope of finding a better acceptance and tolerance. Under the cover of progressive dogmas, some Western and Eastern feminists will continue to speak in the name of third world women, triggering in all women a retreat into a 'national identity' or selfless and sexless socialist system, neither of which speaks to women's experience and struggles in their own lives.'[278]

Because Aboulela's characters are structured and defined by religious and patriarchal discourses, and because the narrative is wary of appearing to comply with Western values, 'the question of women' is argued directly within Islamic and traditional ideologies, as is the case in Arab societies. This turns women in fiction as well as in reality into subordinate subjects in society, and into subjects of self-sacrifice for the sake of the patriarchal nation. Mernissi notes,

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[278] Accad, 1991: 244

reality into subordinate subjects in society, and into subjects of self-sacrifice for the sake of the patriarchal nation. Mernissi notes,

> According to Ghazali...women are a dangerous distraction that must be used for specific reasons of providing the Muslim nation with offspring and quenching the tensions of the sexual instinct. But in no way should women be an object of emotional investment or the focus of attention, which should be devoted to Allah alone in the form of knowledge-seeking, mediation, and prayer.[279]

Aboulela's characters portray a similar picture of that in the above quotation. She portrays Arab women as 'normal' women as they seek love and they worry about not being attractive or feminine enough. But they hold back their words and deny themselves feelings in order to comply to traditional concerns of propriety and discretion. This very same silence, however, can emphasise the stereotype of the veiled, since all Aboulela's characters are veiled, as oppressed and silenced women. Aboulela does not portray them as women who are able to express their desires nor as women who take control of their lives.

Sammar's love towards Rae seems genuine, although it is expressed in a shallow style in terms of being lonely and alienated. The narrative is shallow as it lacks imaginative styles in metaphors, language and ideas. The novelist's way of describing and expressing Sammar's love is through food, cooking, or performing house duties; such as wishing to wash his laundry or cook for him, and suggestions such as 'her feelings were in the soup'[280] that she makes for him. The most striking of all is when she describes herself as chicken froth wishing to be rescued. The narrator says,

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[279] Mernissi, 1975: 45
[280] *The Translator*, 86

'When she boiled chicken, froth rose to the surface of the water and she removed it with a spoon. It was granulated dirt the colour of peanuts, scum from the chicken that was better not eaten. Inside Sammar there was froth like that, froth that could rise if she started to speak. Then he would see it and maybe go away, when what she wanted was for him to remove it so that she could be clear. It would be easy for him to make her clear, she thought, as easy as untying a ribbon.' [281]

The ways the novelist chooses to portray Muslim women in the West is very dangerous, as it not only emphasises their oppression but portrays them to be happy under patriarchal dogmas. The narrative seems wary of both cultural relativism and cultural imperialism and characters are stuck in between. At times they are happy with their conditions as the Western alternative does not seem appealing to them, and at other times they seek change according to Western modernity but they are stopped because they are silenced. Rae for Sammar does not only symbolise love, and he is not only a member of a dialogue between Islam and the West. He is a symbol of emancipation from Sammar's own self and from her 'uncivilised' origin, but on Sammar's social and religious terms.

In 'Love as Difference' Ruth Mas notes that the question of love and Islam in the West cannot be divorced from how the West represents itself, how the West represents others, and how Islam is represented in the West. Love in the West has been mainly coded into notions of freedom. The strong prescriptions on marriage and sexuality in Islamic societies have led many to think that love and romance do not exist in Islam.[282] Aboulela portrays only one kind of freedom; that which gives women the capacity to choose someone to love. She intentionally avoids other notions of freedom to distinguish between the values Arab and Western women live

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[281] ibid: 6
[282] See Mas, 2004

under suggesting that Arab women are better off than their exploited sisters. The novelist avoids representing love as instrument to lift religious and social controls on women rather she attempts to portray love to be part of religious and social norms providing the 'right' context. She avoids forming Islamic understandings of love that agrees with modernist lines inscribed within Western codes of conduct and values. Islam is represented as the ultimate point of identification, which, in turn, suggests the rejection of total assimilation into Western cultures. This act of identification and rejection can be politically dangerous as the narrative's discourse on love is founded and contributes to the ongoing negotiation between Islam and the West. Ruth Mas notes,

> ''Love' amplifies the stakes involved in the ordering of social relations with regard to the relations of the sexes, gender, social institutions and the political order and codifies how society thinks about itself.'[283]

Aboulela takes Islam as a point of departure for the discussion of the cultural and lived phenomena of 'love' and reveals what is at stake culturally and politically in her narratives. *The Translator*'s discourse on love engages with the question of identity and difference in order to centre and essentialise Islam. However, Aboulela's conservative discourse risks invoking the very dichotomy between Islam and the West that a supporter of reconciliation should avoid. The narrative also colludes with contemporary 'Third World' religious discourse and traditions in the way they define women's 'authentic' place within their culture.[284]

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[283] ibid: 275
[284] See Uma Narayan, 1997

3.6 Conclusion

The Translator attempts to shape a debate on how social and political survival can be managed without sacrificing traditional and religious sanctioned norms. The religious discourse of the narrative emphasises women's importance to the virtuous Muslim community and dictates constricting rules for women's appropriate behaviour. The novelist's priority is preserve traditional and religious codes of practice. The narrative suggests that political and social stability are far more important than gender inequality. It employs religion to preserve traditional and religious values.

The narrative focuses on Muslim women as representatives of religion and culture in the West. This reveals that women are placed at the symbolic centre of political and social concerns because of their symbolic place in the nation. Disregarding their voice or portraying it as one that echoes patriarchal or colonialist discourses is a downfall of the narrative. Moreover, although the narrative juxtaposes between religious discourse and reconciliatory discourse, it fails to create a new combined dialogue between Islam and the West, but succeeds in emphasising the negation of each other.

Aboulela's novel and the collection of short stories steer simplistic notions of progress and improvement that are prevalent in Western and Eastern discourses on each other. The novelist scales societies to prove which is better or worse rather than identifying how images of each culture can be prejudicial in one's own society. Misleading cultural comparisons support contentions of superiority, which divert attention from the process of reconciliation. The mediators between the two cultures in the narratives are nothing but another attempt at stereotyping. The literary language is limited to Islamic themes, shutting down the real voices of the characters

and making them agents to convey the novelist's messages directly and artificially. The novelist does not portray the reality of people's emotions and desires but attempts to portray what is 'right' and 'wrong' in relation to religion. The sole voice of religion in the narratives is derogatory as it indicates that humans have no voice and that they are prone to sin if they ever express otherwise.

The Translator has been described as a 'halal' novel for its commitment to religious teachings. The similarities between the characters are heavy handed; it is amazing that such people can live such a simplistic life. The author misses the subtleties and realities of two cultures meeting. There is also something less than pleasing, in literary terms, in the way in which religious lessons are delivered, making the narrative appear like a defence-mechanism to the claimed 'inferiority' of the East.

Religious discourse in narratives or in other genres in the current predicament between the Islamic world and the Western ones is full of heavy implications as, if it is demonstrated irrationally, it would create more misconceptions and dilemmas among its readers. To explain how and why these two civilisations reached this stage of hostility Ahdaf Soueif avoids the religious discourse and replaces it with a nationalistic one in an attempt to re-write history from the colonised's point of view. The following chapter will attempt to focus on how *The Map of Love* combines history with fiction to reveal Egypt's history from the Egyptians' point of view as opposed to the coloniser's.

Chapter Four

History, Nationalism and Romance in *The Map of Love*

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.[285]

4.1 Introduction

Although Ernest Renan is resolutely Euro-centric in his focus, the above quote can be a description of what manifests itself today as Arab nationalism. Nationalism repeatedly invokes traditions or a glorious past symbolised by culture, family, language, religion and women, which has been trampled upon by the coloniser. Nationalism contests and appropriates the colonialist version of the past in revealing the involvement of the colonised in the production of colonial knowledge and colonial resistance.

Many believe that literature has the capacity to intervene in history and helps to reconstruct it. Fanon notes that resisting colonialism, the once imperial and now industrial and economic hegemony of the West, means giving back the past its value.[286] In order to escape the master/slave cycle, postcolonial subjects must produce a narrative of history and knowledge, as Paul Hamilton suggests, through 'parodic distance' not 'scientific mastery.'[287] Hamilton argues that the struggle to empower a postcolonial stance takes the form of attacking the very idea of a cultural centre with a single history that needs revision or supplementation. Parodic distance

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[285] Renan, 1990: 19
[286] See Fanon: 1967
[287] Hamilton, 1996: 184

offers a subversive mimicry which questions the usual aims and goals of cultural controversy. This form of stylistic rewriting of history offers another knowledge where the identities of the oppressor and the oppressed are questioned, distorted and resisted.[288]

Historical fiction has a strong political significance especially for women and postcolonial writers as 'the imperatives behind female and ethnic (re)writing of history are inescapably different from those of white men.'[289] One of the driving forces in the writing of historic fiction is to give a voice to the silenced subject. For a woman, to re-write an established male-authored work – as history writing has been mainly exclusive to men – presents a challenge to both the author and the reader.[290]

Ahdaf Soueif writes a novel that spans British colonialism, the rise of Egyptian national feelings and reveals the complexity of cultures and politics of the nineteenth century and the present time. Most of her characters are historic figures from the late nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century, performing in the novel exactly what they have during their lives. The novelist indirectly exposes the barbarism and ignorance of the colonial power as she reveals the colonial discourse through a British woman positioned inside the Egyptian culture. By doing this, Soueif gives the narrative authenticity in the eyes of the West, restores women's presence in the past, and attempts to reconcile the two divisions: East and the West. *The Map of Love*, if the fictional element is taken out of it, would simply be an historical book about Egypt.

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[288] ibid: 183-4
[289] Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2004: 142
[290] ibid: 142

The narrative interlinks three very strong and sympathetic women: Anna Winterbourne, Amal al-Ghamrawi and Isabel Parkman. Two plots unfold in parallel over two time-frames. One is set at the end of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the other is in the late twentieth century. The first heroine, Lady Anna Winterbourne, whose husband dies at an early stage in the novel, travels from Britain to Egypt in 1900 and falls in love with Layla's brother Sharif Pasha Al-Baroudi, an Egyptian man who is committed to nationalism in Egypt. Through her journey with him, Anna realises the brutality and the vulgarity of colonialist Britain and writes her thoughts in her diaries and letters to her friends in Britain.

At the other end of the century, Amal and Isabel meet in Egypt. Isabel, an American, travels to Egypt in an attempt to understand and learn more about her ancestors. Amal's encounter with Isabel in Cairo involves receiving a trunk that Isabel inherited to find out that it contains Anna's diaries and letters. When Amal discovers what is in the trunk and all the fascinating details of the personal and the political histories, she develops a warm empathetic relationship with Anna across time and space. Amal and Isabel explore Anna's story and through this search they establish continuity between past and present. Amal and Anna are the main voices in the novel. Amal represents modern 'independent' Egypt, while Anna, through her letters and diaries, which constitute personal and political history on their own, represents the English coloniser as well as colonised Egypt.

Anna meets Layla al-Baroudi and her brother, Sharif, after she was abducted by two Egyptian men trying to respond to the coloniser's brutality and the imprisonment of Layla's husband. Anna and Layla become friends instantly and Sharif and Anna fall

in love after a trip they take together to Sinai. Sharif proposes to Anna and despite all the difficulties they face given that she is a British aristocrat and he is an Egyptian nationalist, they get married. A Few years later they have a baby girl called Nour al-Hayat. They live happily together despite the fear they had of the outside world. Sharif was assassinated ten years after his marriage.

Through this narrative, Soueif is concerned with documenting history and with the genetic transmission of narrative through a family line. Focusing on the story of the nineteenth century, this chapter examines the counter-active discourse of the novel as a method of re-writing Egyptian history. It discusses the bridge that Soueif attempts to create between geographical boundaries, time and space through reconciliatory discourse and romance. This chapter also attempts to reveal how different conflicting issues between two cultures surface, affecting individuals' lives in the past and the present. It also examines the novelist's conscious decision of deploying a Western woman to negate misconceptions of Arab/Islamic traditions in Egypt. The novel is narrated by two women and their experiences with colonialism and imperialism, therefore, it is almost impossible to examine the narrative without looking at gender relations.

4.2 A Historic Background to the Narrative

British colonisation in Egypt produced one of the most significant colonial encounters of the modern era. It shaped Egyptian economic, political and social development for several decades and had an impact on the formation of the country's political leadership. British colonisation resulted in anti-colonial and anti-imperial nationalist movements that affected Egypt and the whole region in the first half of the twentieth

century. Britain occupied Egypt to safeguard the Suez Canal, and in the context of the imperial competition of the era, to prevent France from occupying it first. Egypt was declared a protectorate in 1914.

Soueif sets her novel in the period of Lord Cromer's service in Egypt. Cromer was one of the British administrators who controlled the occupation with absolute authority. The novel portrays his attitude toward locals, which was not an atypical of many British officials at the time. Cromer believed in the innate superiority of the West, and was convinced that the 'Orientals' could never improve until they had mastered the ways of the West. Accordingly, Egyptians required a long apprenticeship from Britain. Cromer's priorities were to restore Egypt's credit by meeting the debt payment and maintaining domestic stability by supporting the rule of Khedive Tawfiq. Cromer was totally against the development of any local industrial base that might offer competition to the British textile industry, so he sought to increase Egypt's revenue by expanding its agricultural production.

The British administration's concern with agricultural development brought great wealth to a tiny minority in the countryside. The Egyptians who benefited were the large landholders who saw their property values and their profits grow. These landholders might not have liked the British occupation, but still tried to preserve the socio-economic advantages it gave them even after Egypt's independence, while the needs of Egyptian peasants were largely neglected.

As for the field of education, the novel reveals Cromer's policies, which were regressive mainly due to financial and political reasons. During his first years in

office, Egypt's financial situation was uncertain which led him to reduce the budget for education. As a result, many postsecondary schools were closed, enrolments in public primary and secondary schools declined and tuition fees on all levels were introduced which restricted public access to education. As for the political reason, the growth of Western-style education was expected to create a group of Egyptian intellectuals with nationalist ideas and a sense of frustration over their colonial status. The colonial power feared that the growth of such an educated class would cause tension as the educated believed they were qualified to govern their own country.

The primary medium through which the educated Egyptian class expressed their opinion was the press. As the novel reveals, journalism flourished before and during British colonisation and was given an important place in Egypt's political and cultural life. Many newspapers were founded, such as *al-Muqattam*, *al-Ahram* and *al-Liwa*, which represented the rise of the Egyptian protest. *Al-Ahram* was founded in 1876 and *Al-Liwa* was founded in 1900 by Mustafa Kamil (1874 -1908) who was a lawyer, skilful political journalist and a splendid speaker. He contributed significantly to the emergence of the idea of territorial nationalism and believed that Egypt was already a nation that is fully qualified to rule itself. In his view, Egypt is a unique territorial entity and it is the duty of every Egyptian to offer their deepest affection to their country. Kamil was also active in promoting the need to educate women for a more civilised nation.

Among other prominent figures in that period who are mentioned in the novel is Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Abduh served as a judge and then was appointed mufti of Egypt in 1899. His main aim was to demonstrate that Islam was compatible

with modernity and that educated Muslims did not have to choose between being modern and being Muslims because both were compatible.[291]

The idea of nationalism became explicit in the late nineteenth century among Egyptians and it arose as an attempt to limit or end British occupation. Books, periodicals and newspapers were channels through which the values of the West were introduced to Arabs as well as the channel through which Arabs expressed their resentment of their inferior status as occupied nations. Through time, a new kind of literature also emerged. Arab writers wrote novels and poetry that expressed their consciousness of themselves as Arabs in order to make a place for their countries in the modern world.

Historical facts are found in history or academic books, but whether for personal or imperial interests, they cannot be thought of as the absolute truth. They are narrated differently to suite the purpose of the writer or the wider context. As Paul Hamilton argues, 'all sorts of historical narratives' employ the full range of associated discriminations – race, gender, religion, social practices – to justify almost any behaviour of one group of people towards another. He states: 'The discontinuities between the interests of the coloniser and colonised make a coherent history of their exchange virtually impossible.'[292]

The Map of Love reveals Egypt's glorious past and attempts to retrieve and rebuild in order to comprehend the present and develop new perspectives for the future. The narrative re-writes history based on the nation's interpretation of historic events. It is

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[291] The historical information in this section are based on William Cleveland, 2000: pp.102-8 and Hourani, 1991

[292] Hamilton, 1996: 176

an attempt to efface all negative interpretations that were inserted into the nation's history, and to draw out previously neglected positive aspects. As one character in the novel reveals, '…history can be changed…it's people who make history. The problem is that we are allowing other people to make our history.'[293]

4.3 Truth and Fact: Fiction, History and Nationalism

Herman Harrell Horne in *Story-Telling, Questioning and Studying* defines the story as 'a free narration, not necessarily factual but truthful in character…[It] gives us human nature in its bold outlines; history, in its individual details.'[294] In *Woman, Native Other* Trinh T. Minh-ha notes,

> Poetry, Aristotle said, is truer than history. Storytelling as literature (narrative poetry) must then be truer than history. If we rely on history to tell us what happened at a specific time and place, we can rely on the story to tell us not only what might have happened, but also what is happening at an unspecified time and place.[295]

Minh-ha notes that story telling, history and literature are all forms of truth. When history separates itself from story, it indulges in accumulation and facts. When history or historians think they could present facts of the past they separate their narrative from the present and the future. Unlike the story which organises the past to understand both the present and the future. Minh-ha continues that both literature and history are stories but this does not mean that the space they form is undifferentiated but it can articulate on a different set of principles and stand outside a hierarchal realm of facts.[296]

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[293] *The Map of Love*, 228
[294] Horne, 1917: 23-4
[295] Minh-ha, 1989:120
[296] ibid: 121

In *Studying Literary Theory*, Roger Webster also suggests that although 'viewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another.'[297] History has been concerned with knowing the past, and literature with a particular kind of writing or discourse. Both genres have a lot in common as they both employ narrative devices and systems of rhetoric to construct a verbal image of 'reality.'

History is often helpful in forming a 'background' against which literary works can be studied. Webster notes that some historians view literature as having an historical use. It is either a primary text material, or it gives a sense of historical atmosphere that offers imaginative extension to the conventionally considered more factual and objective discipline of history.[298] Hayden White in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* also suggests,

> ...[I]t was possible to believe that whereas writers of fictions invented everything in their narratives – characters, events, motifs, themes, atmosphere, and so on – historians invented nothing but certain rhetorical flourishes or poetic effects to the end of engaging their readers' attention and sustaining their interest in the true story they had to tell...narrative is revealed to be a particularly effective system of discursive meaning production by which individuals can be taught to live a distinctively "imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence," that is to say, an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realise their destinies as social subjects.[299]

Social reality can be lived and realistically comprehended in a story. Through narrative, one is able to translate a culture into a human experience since 'we might not be able to fully comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we

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[297] Webster, 1996: 110
[298] ibid: 110
[299] White, 1989: x

have relatively less difficulty understanding a story coming from another culture, however exotic that culture may appear to us.'[300]

Events in history books are detached from subjective personal reality, as they concentrate, most of the times, on objective facts. Whether these facts are truthful or not, they 'happened long time ago.'[301] This formula is substituted in fictional narratives with 'What we are going to speak of happened somewhere else, but it might well have happened here today and it might happen tomorrow.'[302] When historical facts are narrated within a story of emotional struggles, tragic love affairs, or feelings of joy and happiness, the reader would relate to them as symbols of life. These events would become a story that one should read, see his/her personal life through and learn from. Through the personal, the reader becomes involved with the past and the politics that formed a nation's history and still forms its present and future. Therefore, as White notes, what distinguishes history from narrative is 'objectivity' vs. 'subjectivity'. In the 'objectivity,' no one speaks, but the events are told to us. As for the 'subjectivity,' it is given to us by a presence whether implicit or explicit; 'an 'ego' who can be defined only as the person who maintains the discourse.'[303]

In her narratives, Ahdaf Soueif combines the personal with historical incidents. The love stories and some characters are fictional, but they are narrated within true historic events and real names that existed during a particular period of time. In Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, for example, the personal forms the major part of the novel with

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[300] ibid: 4
[301] Fanon, 1963: 193
[302] ibid: 193
[303] White, 1989: 3

history cutting through events. By doing this, the novelist effectively reflects the political events that shaped the history of the region, and accurately captures the reaction of a generation during conflicting times by reflecting the political and the historical on their personal lives. Soueif describes the 1967 war, Arab socialism, the crisis between Jordanians and Palestinians in the 1970s, the death of Nasser, the Sadat era, the bombing of south Lebanon, the Palestinian Liberation movement, and the Israeli occupation. The narrative, however, revolves mainly around Asya's personal life and historical events appear as flash lights of the outside world. Through this strategy, the novelist draws similarities between Asya's personal/sexual affairs and the political; and concludes that they are both impotent. She also sheds light on the importance of a nation's political struggle in forming and affecting social and personal realities.

In *In the Eye of the Sun,* history and politics do not form the bulk of the narrative but give it a sense of reality. The historical events seem external to the narrative, yet provide an important background. They are there to put the life of a woman in Egypt into a wider context, which helps the reader to understand her personal life and the hierarchal realm of social values and restrictions as two of Soueif's protagonists say 'the personal is the political.' White suggests that real events should not speak or tell themselves. Rather they should simply be there to serve as referents of a discourse or be spoken about. But they should never pose as the subject of the narrative.[304]

The Map of Love is different as history constitutes the personal lives of characters; they are inseparable. The narrative starts with a family tree, which represents the

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[304] ibid: 3

fictional characters of the past and the present. The rest of the characters are historic ones. Events concerned with the nineteenth century, such as balls, demonstrations, most characters and names are real. Soueif plotted the fictional family into the historical figures and events to make their story truthful but not necessarily factual. The family link in the narrative is of importance since it allows the past to be explored through personal connections. Both Amal and Isabel's desire to know the past comes from the inheritance of the old papers in the trunk. Their knowledge of it is gained by a direct encounter with their ancestors rather than the traditional methods of researching it. Soueif uses genealogy and particularly the female line in the family to offer traceability from one generation to another and to provide an alternative means to ensure the sequence and continuity of events in time.[305]

At times it is difficult to draw the line between the fictional and the historical. The narrative juxtaposes Anna's personal life and Egyptian history revealing that what constitutes Anna's personal life is actually the history of Egypt. Soueif draws no line between the personal lives of her characters and political events, which indicates that what defines our lives as persons is all political. This act helps to understand the context of Anna's life as an individual and to relate to the narrated events as they are the circumstances that shaped her life and many others. Anna educates the reader about the politics that shaped Egypt's history from the Egyptians' point of view.

Soueif describes the historical element as the 'engine' of the narrative. She says in an interview with Joseph Massad,

> ...*The Map of Love* is quite different. The politics are there from the beginning, and possibly that's because I now see politics and

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[305] Boccardi, 2004: 192-3

> history as central to our lives, and therefore I created a situation and characters to whom politics and history are central. Also, politics and history are very much part of the novel – in fact are an essential part of the engine that drives it.[306]

As a result, the characters, fictional or real, are agents of the history Soueif attempts to re-write. They appear to have little authority over their lives as factual events dictate the course of action. Soueif portrays interpersonal and intergenerational memories in the sites of heroic achievements in the progression of Egyptian history. This unites the past with the future through an active and nationally aware present. She also portrays nationalism through all kinds of love. Her main characters are from a common descent, which makes the novel and the nation a kind of 'super-fictive family to which all its members irrevocably belong.'[307] The fictional characters, like Sharif and Anna, at some point become real historic figures that could have existed.

Anna's detailed diaries of her life in Egypt, Arabic and English newspaper articles, along with Layla Al-Baroudi's testimonies, reflect upon the political problems of Egypt in 1990s. Through the four heroines, Anna, Layla, Amal and Isabel, Soueif reveals patterns of analogy involving the dual history of social and political life at both ends of the century. Amal and Isabel are there to evoke the past and the current political chaos in the world. For example, Anna was neutral at the beginning of her journey reporting as she sees the unjust policies of the British colonisation and the ways they justified their supremacy over Egyptians. She reports in a letter to Sir Charles, her father in-law, what she hears from one British official,

> '...it would take generations before the Natives were fit to rule themselves as they had neither integrity nor moral fibre, being too long accustomed to foreign rule – and if foreign rule was

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[306] Massad, 1999: 84
[307] Suleiman, 2003: 24

> their lot, then British rule was surely to be preferred to that of the French or the Germans, who would surely have been here if we were not.'[308]

In the 1990s a parallel situation is witnessed with the United States being the most powerful nation in the world with great influence over Egypt: Amal says,

> 'It must be so hard to come to a country so different, a people so different, to take control and insist that everything be done your way. To believe that everything can *only* be done your way. I read Anna's descriptions, and I read the memoirs and the accounts of these long-gone Englishmen, and I think of the officials of the American embassy and agencies today, driving through Cairo in their locked limousines with the smoked-glass windows, opening their doors only when they are safe inside their Marine-guarded compounds.'[309]

Also, a conversation between intellectuals in 1997 reveals how Egypt is still economically 'colonised' and strategies like Cromer's are still used, one man objects,

> 'What aid? Do you know that 70 percent of what they give us feeds directly back to the American economy? Directly, mind you. You think they give us aid because they want to help us?'[310]

The narrative also demonstrates analogies between the feelings of intellectuals at both ends of the century concerning Zionism, Islam and the state, conditions of peasants, and the education of women. The narrative gives importance to a wide range of views on Egyptian nationalism and separates it on many occasions from Arab nationalism. The discussion between intellectuals at the end of the twentieth century reveals that the situation of the present time is much harder to understand and to cope with than that of the pre-independence era. The enemy is harder to identify in the middle of the complex conflicts impinging on the region, and options available are limited and do not provide a satisfactory solution. One character concludes at the end of the

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[308] *The Map of Love*, 99-100
[309] ibid: 70
[310] ibid: 230

discussion, 'It's either Israeli domination – backed by America – or the Islamist radicals. Take your pick.'[311]

Nationalism is portrayed as not only the love for one's country, rather the narrative combines the love of family, ancestors, memories and even the 'good' British/coloniser to nationalism in an act of reconciliation. By using history, the novelist suggests that the past should be loved no matter how painful it is, as the past creates one's present, which in turn creates one's future. The act of love such as Sharif's love for his country and his love for Anna are both natural phenomena that, as the narrative suggests, should not clash but reconcile and prosper.

As a result of this reconciliatory discourse, *The Map of Love* does not appear as an anti-colonial novel in the explicit ways of expressing resentment of a hegemonic Englishness. Women novelists/writers writing history tend to focus more on peaceful themes and reconciliation that would bring prosperity to the nation. For example, the character Sa'eed in Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* embodies a model of opposition rather than reconciliation. He symbolises the aggrieved colonised whose priority in the novel is to avenge his nation's suffering which resulted from the British colonisation. The novel foreshadows Sudan's postcolonial anguish and portrays Eurocentricity. When Sa'eed travels to Britain he sees himself as the invader on a mission to avenge his country. He equates the land to the woman and the lover.[312] The protagonist kills and rapes English women, which signals aggressiveness and hostility that does not exist in Arab women's reconciliatory and nationalistic narratives.

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[311] ibid: 230
[312] Amyuni, 1985: 10

The Map of Love encourages a cross-cultural marriage between the coloniser and the colonised and acknowledges Western influence on Egypt. It also brings up the good nature of some English officials and other English historic characters and their resentment to the policies of the Empire.

Many statements in the novel reveal that there was some opposition within the Empire to the strategies used in the colonies, which is emphasised by using real British names of that era who were against the Empire's policies in the colonies such as Mr Blunt, Lady Lucy Duff Gordon and Anne Blunt. These figures not only show that some Britons were against the occupying policies used in other lands, they also show English national feelings toward their country and their concern for its reputation as a 'civilised' one. Sir Charles says,

> 'I told him [Edward] this was not an honest war… This was a war dreamed up by politicians, a war to please that widow so taken with her cockney Empire – Ah what's the use?...Well, if you do not bring down a curse on the British Empire for what you have been doing, there is no truth in Christianity… This invention, the British Empire, will be the ruin of our position as an honest Kingdom.'[313]

The narrative, although reconciliatory, challenges the discursive structures that circulated during the nineteenth century and informed the way knowledge was produced. It demonstrates that what the coloniser produced as 'objective' statements on the East are in fact produced with a context of evaluation and denigration. Through tackling the issue of colonisation in a non-aggressive and non-confrontational manner, the narrative proposes a quiet, but determined, resistance to

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[313] *The Map of Love*, 30-2

British powers, in conjunction with a reassessment and celebration of the national culture. Soueif creates a national imagination; an imagination of the nation as the fundamental context of individual life and as the real subject of history. Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests,

> Literature and history once were/still are stories: this does not necessarily mean that the space they form is undifferentiated, but that this space can articulate on a different set of principles, one which may be said to stand outside the hierarchal realm of facts. On the one hand, each society has its own politics of truth; on the other hand, being truthful is being in the in-between of all regimes of truth.[314]

The novel takes a step forward towards achieving complete independence in the cultural sphere. It is an attempt to revise history and re-write it from an Egyptian woman's perspective. Through this revision, the narrative does not suggest the total exclusion of the Western part and does not deny its influence on the nation. This exhibits a yearning for a somewhat glorified past and also manifests a need for reconciliation with the oppressor. In *Bardic Nationalism* Katie Trumpener suggests that literature of nationalism is concerned with the renewal of past glories and traditions of a nation, and therefore, it is only appropriate that it celebrates and honours its own history.[315] In *The Modern Scottish Novel*, Cairns Craig agrees by suggesting that a novel is an 'embodied argument' that carries forward traditions from the past, it is a symbolic enactment of debates telos which justifies the individual life as part of the social, which makes the novel a national narrative.[316]

Sharif's character represents this glorifying past, its eternal being and also the need for reconciliation. As a lawyer and a nationalist, he charms the reader with his

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[314] Minh-ha, 1989: 121
[315] Trumpener, 1997: 13
[316] Craig, 1999: 24

charismatic and alluring personality. He is a man who fights for the integrity of the national culture and the liberation of his country through honesty and dignity. Sharif is portrayed to set an example for all people who fight against colonialism or imperialism. He is portrayed as a leader who educates the world about fundamental standards of human dignity and liberation. When Anna is abducted by two Egyptian men, Sharif is very angry as this act does not coincide with the morals and integrity of the Egyptian nation. Instead of being delighted with taking a British man or woman into hostage as a revenge for the British's unjust policies and the imprisonment of his brother-in-law, he describes the act as irresponsible and irrational. He says,

> 'The law serves no one. The law may be bent – or got around – but if we wish the English to respect our law we cannot suddenly put it to one side and say, but this time we will act without reference to it…What I want you to understand,' he said, 'is that abducting – or in any way harming – ordinary people is never an act of heroism. It is wrong. And it has repercussions. This is not the way we want to go. It goes in the balance against everything we have tried to do over the last eighteen years. What the British want is to accuse us of fanaticism. If we give them reason, we lose out.'[317]

Nationalism to Sharif is not 'fundamentalism' or 'Islamic extremism.' His nation derives its superiority from the 'spirit' of its culture while the coloniser's superiority is derived from the material world. He suggests that if the British government does not respect the law or the freedom of individuals, then 'we' should be better than 'them.' He is more concerned with the culture's image and its values as an influential weapon rather than conventional aggressive forms of fighting colonialism. Sharif lives at the end of the century through Omar's character, Amal's brother who lives in the United States. But Omar in the modern time, who believes and fights for almost

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[317] *The Map of Love,* 139-40

exactly what Sharif believed in and fought for, is described as a 'terrorist' at the beginning of the novel. This expresses what Arabs signify nowadays in Western media. Unlike Sharif, Omar believes in regional nationalism, he has Palestinian links and he is an activist for the rights of Palestinians and Iraqis. Through Omar's character, who is also portrayed as charming and charismatic, the Western reader is confronted with the fact that those who believe in the freedom of their nations are not necessarily 'terrorists.' Both heroes are perfectly created to be loved by the reader, as honest Egyptian nationalists rather than 'fanatical Arabs.'

While the narrative reveals the integrity of Egyptian nationalism in the struggle for freedom, it demonstrates the vulgarity and dishonesty of the coloniser. Soueif uses a vital historical incident in the novel to show this. A fabricated letter was sent to Anna from Britain. Lord Cromer asks Mr. Boyle to write a letter to the Foreign Office in Britain to persuade them to send reinforcements. They both pretend that the letter is from one of their Arab spies who knows that a revolution is being planned. The letter starts with the following: 'To the Branch of the Fair tree, the Light Rain of the Generous Cloud, the Son and Daughter of the Prophet…'[318]

The letter is clearly not written by an Arab. Anyone who knows anything about the Arab culture would know from the first sentence that the letter is nonsense even to a 'fanatical Arab.' But the British Foreign Office would think something else, as Sharif says,

> 'But the Foreign Office will not know that. They will read "camels" and "God is generous" and "odours of blessings" and they will say "fanatical Arabs" and send the troops.'[319]

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[318] ibid: 417
[319] ibid: 419

The letter is a fake and a great example of how translation can be treacherous and double-crossing, causing disasters for nations when people like Lord Cromer do not have the integrity and the nobility of the civilised. Soueif advocates in the novel that Egyptian national history is full of glory, dignity, honesty and solemnity despite the coloniser's attempts to rip of the nation from its past, distort it, and destroy it. Within this act of devaluing the history of the oppressed lies resistance to colonial discourse today. Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot observes,

> The need to re-write a people's history is typical of all post-colonial and post-revolutionary societies, and is a natural and a healthy one. For if every generation must needs to write its own history, how much more acute is the need for a people who, as in the case of Egypt, have thrown off the burden of an alien domination, as well as that of a bankrupt political regime. The ghost of the past must therefore be exorcised, the myths destroyed and new ones created, if only to be destroyed in their turn by a new generation.[320]

The Map of Love is a powerful novel, with all the historical, political and the personal aspects involved. It becomes more powerful with the political parallels Soueif evokes between the beginning and the end of the twentieth century. At both ends of the century Egyptians try to liberate their country from a coloniser/imperialist. Amal sends a letter, written by Sharif in 1911, to Omar. She asks him to re-write and publish it as the issues it reveals are similar to the conflicts of the present time. She suggests that history is repeating itself and colonialism still exists but in different forms. In the letter Sharif says,

> 'Europe simply does not see the people of the country it wishes to annex – and when it does, it sees them in accordance with its own old and accepted definitions: backward people, lacking rational abilities and subject to religious fanaticism. People whose countries – the holy and picturesque lands of the East –

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[320] Marsot, 1973: 2

> are too good for them. And what of us Orientals? What is our responsibility in all this?...There have been those among us who have been so dazzled by the might and technological wizardry of Europe that they have been rather as a man who stands lost in admiration at the gun that is raised to shoot him.'[321]

He concludes the letter by saying,

> 'If there are elements of Western Culture in us, they have been absorbed through visiting your countries, learning in your institutions and opening ourselves to your culture. There we have been free to choose those elements that most suited our history, our traditions and aspirations – that is a legitimate commerce of humanity. Our only hope now – and it is a small one – lies in a unity of conscience between the people of the world for whom this phrase itself would carry any meaning, it is difficult to see the means by which such a unity can be effected. But it is in its support that these words are written.'[322]

Soueif's novel portrays Egypt as the true heroine. The historical detail and debate emerge as vital to understand the past and as essential to shape the present and the future. Having the nation as the main protagonist is typical of most postcolonial literature as resistance and efforts of claiming back a nation's history and identity are important themes in this kind of literature. The Palestinian novelist Yasmin Zahran, for example, portrays similar themes but in different ways from the ones expressed in Soueif's. Zahran writes a novel that explains the feelings of an exiled people and an occupied land through combining politics, history, culture and personal affairs in her story. She starts her nationalistic and passionate novel *A Beggar at Damascus Gate* with 'All characters in this book are ficticious, only Palestine is real.' Unlike *The Map of Love* in which a few characters are real, Zahran makes the land and what is related to it the only truth in her novel. This shows the importance of the land and makes events related to it as the only reality of its people during its occupation.

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[321] *The Map of Love*, 483
[322] ibid: 484

Palestinian literature written in Arabic and other languages manifest an attempt to emphasise and reinstate the Palestinian identity. This identity is not threatened by an occupation similar to that of the British and the French where the interest is economical and/or cultural. Zionism aims at wiping out the Palestinian identity and Palestine completely. Zahran's narrative attempts to resist this thesis and stresses on the existence of a people and a nation that many try to forget.

This novel, contrary to *The Map of Love*, shows that reconciliation with the oppressor is not the solution to put an end to a chaotic situation. *A Beggar at Damascus Gate* shows that when a nation is under occupation the struggle is aimed at independence only. What is significant about this novel is that it portrays a lost nation, a people without a land and the emotional and political struggle for preserving their identity. Each novel has a different agenda that goes along with the current political and social circumstances of the nation. Egypt has gained its independence but has ambivalent relationship with the oppressor while Palestine is still occupied and suffers from the danger of being completely wiped out. Both people are suffering from two different issues and therefore their struggle and goals are different. Zahran's narrative portrays another truth and another reality of a (post)colonised nation that is not discussed in *The Map of Love*.

The pain for the loss of Palestine is in every word of Zahran's narrative and the personal overlaps with the historical and the political. The history unfolds in a hotel near Petra where an American professor discovers several journals written by two lovers. As he delves deeper into the journals, which describe the love, suspicions, and eventual downfall of the couple, he decides to edit the diaries into one manuscript

and tell their story to the world. The narrative, through the journals, depicts the life of a Palestinian woman, Rayya, living in exile, the pain caused by her separation from her homeland Palestine, and her lover, a British man, Alex.

Rayya is an activist for the Palestinian cause and Alex turns out to be a spy, which lead to his death. The novel suggests no compromise on the most essential issue, Palestine. Love in this story does not bind people together, and if it does, it is for a limited time as the reality and anguish over the loss of Rayya's homeland hangs over her relationship with Alex and over her life. Rayya says,

> 'Back in Paris, I questioned myself as to whether, somewhere in my mind, I insisted on transposing the lover and the lost country. Had I equated my lover with Palestine? What vanity! For who is the man who can restore a lost universe? With what mental aberration or despair did I insist on transforming the lover to replace a captive land. And how could I raise a frail man to these dimensions?'[323]

A Beggar at Damascus Gate, like *The Map of Love*, juxtaposes the past and the present. It connects Zionism, the crusaders and Western imperialism. Rayya says, 'The crusader of yesterday is the Zionist of today, with the same religious mania and always aiming at the same target – Palestine, beloved Palestine.'[324] But unlike *The Map of Love*, the discourse of the narrative is not reconciliatory. It is purely nationalistic expressing no compromise with the enemy or friendship. The issue the narrative focuses on is clear, Palestine is under occupation, and the first priority is its freedom. The novel reminds the world of the Palestinian identity and its right to exist. The struggle for independence and the national consensus with its paramount importance minimises all other social, national or reconciliatory issues. Rayya says,

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[323] *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, 53
[324] ibid: 69

'When I see a friendly westerner, I scratch the surface to find the Zionist underneath.'[325]

The narrative suggests that Arab nationalism is essential to the survival of Palestine, and if it fails then the unity of the Muslim world is the solution. Alex expresses scepticism regarding the unity of the Arab world. He says, 'I only want to know how this projected utopia of a united Arab world would help your cause. Your Arab brothers seem to have forgotten Palestine.'[326] Considering the political situation, his scepticism seems well placed and has been borne out by events as Zionism and Arab nationalism, since the early years of the two movements, have had a shifting relationship. This is evident in a variety of attempts to arrive at a settlement between them since the Faisal-Weizmann accord in 1919, and indeed before that.[327] Rayya seems more optimistic regarding this unity as she sees it as the only hope for the liberation of Palestine. She says,

> 'This cleavage deepened further in other lands with his reaction against what he called bitterly my 'professional Arabism', which left him out. It was an accusation that I considered derogatory since it turned a passionate feeling into a trade, touching a sensitive cord, and I asked myself whether this attachment to Arab nationalism, which we Palestinians carried like a banner, was excessive or seemed so only to Western eyes. Perhaps this excessiveness was our reaction to the international movement of Zionism – in the face of which we needed the power and depth of Arabism. After all, Arab nationalism is built on geography, history, culture and language and is more embracing than Zionism, which is built on religion alone.'[328]

The nationalistic discourse of the narrative calls for Arab nationalism as a method to face Zionism and support Palestine just like Zionism is sponsored and supported by the international world. The narrative expresses romantic feelings towards

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[325] ibid: 68
[326] ibid: 38
[327] Khalidi, 1991: 1369
[328] *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, 37-8

nationalism. It disregards the differing resonance of the ideologies in different parts and in different social strata of the Arab World that have been developed over nearly a century.[329]

As for the West and how it feels about Arab nationalism, the American narrator reveals,

> 'I wondered if it ever occurred to Rayya that the West has interests in the Arab world all of its own, and an image flashed in my mind of a very honorable gentleman moving his cane over a huge map and saying: 'If you follow my cane you will see the measure of the area we call the Arab world; look at it vis-à-vis Europe, and reflect on the consequences. If that dream of Arab unity is one day realised, it will become an immediate threat to our way of life and our standard of living. Just remember that raw materials will become expensive and scarce. Industrialisation and improved agriculture will close the Arab World as a market for western goods, especially British products. Strategically, we will be at their mercy, for they are at the crossroads of a shrinking world.' And here, he tapped his cane against the desk in front of him and said in a whisper: 'We must buy time against this projected unification, which threatens our very existence, and the group of people that you must watch, split, harass and if necessary destroy are the Palestinians, for they, more than any other Arab people need this unity for survival. Strike at the Palestinians and you shatter the core of Arab unity. Please note that every Western power is aiming at the same target by different means.' And he concluded with his voice rising above a whisper: 'Do not let us deceive ourselves: Arab unification is inevitable; all we can do is to delay its course, and it is here that our interests converge with those of the Israelis, for they also are buying time.'[330]

The above quote questions whether the occupation of Palestine is a Zionist dream of the 'promised land' or a Western agenda for progress. Unlike *The Map of Love*, *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, although seems secular, expresses anti-Western feelings as part of the nationalistic discourse of the narrative. Resistance is not in the form of

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[329] Khalidi, 1991: 1369
[330] *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, 69-70

armed militancy or suicide missions, rather it is a cultural resistance to both occupation and imperialism. Rayya says,

> 'My westernisation is fake – it is only a thin veneer – but seriously, Alex, to go back to my school teacher's role, I can accept the term 'westernised' if you mean by that the common heritage the Arab world shares with Europe – which begins with the Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Romans.'[331]

Towards the end of the narrative, it is suggested that Rayya participated in planning Alex's murder indicating that the love for the nation is far more important than personal love affairs and individual people. It also suggests that reconciliation is far from reach as long as Palestine is occupied and Palestinians are in exile. The nationalistic discourse reveals that considering the current political situation, the relationship between Arabs and the West will be one full of confrontations between two enemies, two races and two cultures.[332] Rayya describes in her diary her dilemma, she writes,

> 'To Alex
> I cannot say to you – your people shall be my people
> Your gods shall be my own
> I try to hide from you, no – from myself
> The horror that in their heyday
> Your people sold my people
> Your people gave away my land, my earth, my blood
> Your kin bartered my heritage, my future
> Can you forgive me, if I tell you
> How often you who are so close to me
> Seem alien, of the blood of those who sold my mother's grave.
> Does this explain the moments
> Of estrangement that creep between us
> Could this be the void that stands
> Between oppressor and oppressed?'[333]

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[331] ibid: 39
[332] ibid: 72
[333] ibid: 72

Nationalism, it has been argued, is articulated as a narrative.[334] Zahran's narrative constructs a nationalism shaped by the exigencies of exile. The Palestinian diaspora is particularly dependant on national narratives to maintain its identity and existence. Through portraying a woman in exile and an activist for the Palestinian cause, Zahran like Soueif, situates women's experience at the centre of nationalist struggle and the survival of the national identity. Zahran equates the mother with the land as most postcolonial literature does. The narrator says, Her [Rayya's] mother is dead, but she lives within her. The process has been reversed; the child is carrying the mother, and the mother is equated with Palestine, and this closeness hardly allows for any other.'[335]

4.4 Nationalism and the 'Woman Question'

The 'woman question' appeared as a nationalistic matter during the nineteenth century as Egypt fought for its independence from the British and its separation from the Ottoman Empire. As it has been explained in the introduction of this research, nationalism is a political movement that challenges the colonial state or it is a cultural construct that enables the colonised to posit their difference and autonomy. Anti-colonial nationalism attempts to create 'its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society.' It does this by dividing the world into two parts: material which is the outside sphere that constitutes economy, statecraft, science and technology and another spiritual, the inner domain of culture which constitutes religion, customs and the family. The supremacy of the West is conceded in the material world, whereas the 'spiritual' world is one which must be protected and defended.[336]

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[334] See Bhabha, 1990
[335] *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, 59
[336] See Chatterjee, 1986

Many nationalistic novels written by Arab writers, whether in Arabic, English or French, state and elaborate on this distinction. Most Arab novelists portray national life in the region as one that is concerned mainly with preserving the spiritual and the domestic aspects of society, whereas the material life of the nation can be westernised since westernised to many means 'civilised.' So we find the elite, mostly men, studying in British, American or French institutions, and speaking languages other than their mother tongue. The economy of the country would be attached to the hegemonic economies. They would contract with countries, once in conflict with, because it is in their current interests. But these novelists suggest, perhaps out of personal experiences, that the 'spirit' of the culture is another matter. The 'spirit' of the culture means religion, since most cultural values are derived from Islam. It also means women, since women are seen as mothers of the nation and the symbol of national identity. Loomba suggests,

> The assertion of a gendered spiritual or inner core thus becomes the site for the construction of national identities across a wide political and ideological anti-colonial spectrum. The communities that are imagined by anti-colonial nationalism often invoke a shared past or a cultural essence that is regarded as synonymous with a religious or a racial identity.[337]

The Map of Love portrays the structural changes in Egypt during the late nineteenth century that resulted from colonialism. During the nineteenth century, the dominant social formation, the Ottoman-Egyptian household, unravelled mostly because of the end of slavery. The end of slavery, and mostly the slavery of women, generated a series of debates collectively known as the 'woman question.[338] In 'The Making of the Egyptian Nation,' Beth Baron notes that the slavery of women was a defining feature of the elite Ottoman households. Its abolition helped to speed the 'Egyptionisation' of

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[337] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 195
[338] Baron, 2000:137

this class and threw the entire social structure into disarray.[339] Soueif demonstrates different manifestations of the 'woman question' during the nineteenth century as part of the national movement in Egypt against British colonisation and the Ottoman Empire. Religious and secularly oriented nationalists battled over the cultural content of Egyptian nationalism and the ways of negotiating the 'woman question'. Baron notes that,

> [T]he bundle of issues touching on education, work, seclusion, veiling, marriage, and divorce that collectively made up the 'woman question' thus became the fault line along which cultural adjustments were worked out in Egyptian nationalism.[340]

The novel suggests that most Egyptian nationalists agreed on modernising Egypt but disagreed on how to accomplish that. Among the historical characters in the novel is Qasim Amin who, at the turn of the century, vocalised the debates about the 'woman question' and its relation to the nation with the publication of his two books: *Tahrīr al-mar'a* (*The Emancipation of Woman*) and *al-Mar'a al-jadīda* (*The New Woman*). Soueif makes reference to both books in the narrative. Amin pushed for the education of women, conjugal marriage, unveiling and an end to women's seclusion and segregation. However, his ideas were viewed by many, now and then, to echo colonial and Western rhetoric. Leila Ahmed, for example, attacks Amin in *Women and Gender in Islam* and describes him as 'the son of Cromer and colonialism.'[341] She argues that the so-called feminist was as bad as Cromer for his worry was not the condition of women *per se*, but his intention was to westernise Egypt in every way possible. She points out that he articulated in the local's voice the

> colonial thesis of the inferiority of the native and Muslim and the superiority of the European. Rearticulated in a native upper-middle-class voice, the voice of a class economically allied with

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[339] ibid: 148
[340] ibid: 148
[341] Ahmed, 1992: 163

> the coloniser and already adopting their life-style, the colonialist thesis took on a classist dimension: it became in effect an attack (in addition to all the other broad and specific attacks) on the customs of the lower-middle and lower classes.[342]

Amin and other men who called for the education of women sought to imitate the West and to westernise Egypt without jeopardising their hierarchal status in the social system. They did not call for equality; instead women should be educated to serve educated men in the appropriate manner. The hierarchal realm should stay as it is but with a slight adjustment to its divisions. The novel reveals that in spite of their intention to westernise Egypt, British officials opposed the education of women although their claim was to 'civilise' the country and to 'liberate' its women. Anna says,

> 'For Lord Cromer, I tried to interest him in what my Egyptian friends desire for the education of women and he said that if I knew Egypt better I would know that the religious leaders would never agree to women being encouraged out of their lowly status, and he would not hear another word.'[343]

The hypocrisy of the colonial power is not surprising. If the British wanted to educate women, they would have used their colonial power to do so as they did with everything else. If they genuinely cared about what religious men and politicians found agreeable, they would have granted them their independence. The emancipation of the native woman was part of the white man's 'burden' in the colonised lands. So why listen to religious leaders when the education of women is important as part of improving the 'low status' of the natives? Anna reveals the coloniser's intentions, she says,

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[342] ibid: 162
[343] *The Map of Love*, 248

> 'This was a signal for Mr Willcocks,[344] who deplored how little was being done for education and said he did not believe we intend to leave Egypt when we had finished reforming her – or we would be doing more to educate the people that they might be able to govern themselves.'[345]

Rebuttals to Amin, as the novel suggests, came from religious nationalists such as Mustafa Kamil, Fatima Rashid and Tal'at Harb. While they endorsed women's education, they opposed some of Amin's other reforms. This opposition arose from the belief that Islamic culture should provide models for women and family. Baron argues that this group usually came from middle classes where harem slavery had been most articulated, and continued to look to Istanbul for models rather than Europe.[346]

Soueif depicts how the 'woman question' illuminated a cultural split and difference in religious orientation between the two nationalist camps. This split became clearer with the emergence of the *Watani* and *Umma* parties. This is demonstrated when important reformers in the Egyptian history from both camps meet in Sharif's house to reach an agreement on how Egypt should be modernised. Among the historical characters there was Amin, Tal'at Harb and Mustafa Kamil. When Qasim Amin brings up the 'woman question' topic, Tal'at Harb replies, 'The Question of Women, with all respect –' Tal'at Harb bows towards Qasim Amin – 'is a fabricated question. There is no Question of Women in our country.'[347] He goes on, 'and where will you end?' Tal'at Harb asks. 'By allowing them to work? Giving them the right to divorce?

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[344] W. Willcocks was a British irrigation expert. He worked in Egypt and Iraq and was interested in language reform in Egypt.
[345] *The Map of Love*, 99
[346] Baron, 2000: 149
[347] *The Map of Love*, 380

Changing the laws of inheritance?'[348] Mustafa Kamil supports Harb by saying: 'I have nothing against girls being educated...But we should leave the veil alone'.[349]

In his response, Harb calls for an 'Islamic patriarchy, presenting his views simply as those of traditional, unadorned, God-ordained patriarchy.'[350] He affirms that women's duty is to attend to all her husband's and children's needs, which are the same duties Amin gave her. They differed on the veil, however. Amin's woman should unveil and Kamil and Harb's must veil. Ahmed believes that '[t]he argument between Harb and Amin centred not on feminism versus antifeminism but on Western versus indigenous ways. For neither side was male dominance ever in question.'[351] Leila Abu-Lughod also argues that Amin's reforms and his vision of conjugal marriage effectively subjected women to their husbands and children by undermining women's social bonds.[352]

The novel shows that women were also active in this struggle for women's education and contributed to it amongst themselves. Soueif mentions a few historical names, like Malak Hifni Nassef and Zeinab Fawaaz, who were active in publishing and organising meetings for women to discuss their situation and ways to change it. Anna attends one of those meetings and explains to Sir Charles,

> 'They uphold the idea that a woman's first duty is to her family, merely arguing that she can perform this duty better if she is better educated. They also write articles arguing against the enforced seclusion of women and point out that women of the fellah class have always worked side by side with their menfolk and no harm has come to society as a result...And in all, I do confess, I found the company and conversation most pleasing

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[348] ibid: 381
[349] ibid: 381
[350] Ahmed, 1992: 163
[351] ibid: 163
[352] Abu-Lughod,1998: 258-269

> and quite contrary to the prevailing view of the life of the harem being one of indolence and torpor.'[353]

The novel, however, does not elaborate on the participation of women in the national struggle for independence. It focuses on portraying mainly the 'good natured' Egyptian men from the upper-middle class. Women, in this novel, are merely voices that echo men's. It also seems strange that the only woman who has a voice, more or less, is the English Anna. Layla is there too, but she is there to elaborate on Anna and Sharif's relationship; to express a love she felt for a woman from the first sight and to emphasise the good nature of her brother. The real voice of Amal is absent as well, she mainly romanticises the whole history of Anna and reveals current political predicaments. By ignoring other dimensions of Egyptian history and women's participation in the national struggle, Soueif does not do the feminist movement in Egypt justice. The narrative, although narrated by four women, seems to collaborate with documents that ignore Arab women's participation in history.

Baron notes that the debate on the cultural content of Egyptian nationalism found its clearest expressions in the issues that made up the 'woman question.' Female intellectuals helped to craft some of the symbols that shaped the debates. They fought in the two nationalists' camps, the religious and the secular.[354] Judith Tucker also documents the participation of Egyptian urban and rural women and men together in the national movement. In 'Women and State in 19th Century Egypt' she notes,

> Women also played a role in the urban uprisings of the time, which brought the population into direct confrontation with its rulers. As part of their activities in the urban neighbourhood life, women became involved in the movements of revolt that accompanied the erosion of the old order and the establishment

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[353] *The Map of Love*, 237
[354] See Baron, 2000

> of the new state. ..The proclivities of lower class women for restiveness and revolt were recognised by state officials ... [355]

The narrative focuses on characters at the turn of the century, women and men, from the upper-class. The middle and lower class locals are mainly referred to as servants. This suggests that it is only Egyptian men who spoke French that participated in the national movement. Since Egypt was colonised by the French before it was part of the British Empire, the French language, like the English, is the language of the oppressor. Using French on many occasions in the novel suggests control over the native language, which is one of the main features of imperial oppression. The imposition of the European languages of the colonisers in the educational system in Egypt led to the marginalisation of Arabic. Language became a medium through which a hierarchal power was perpetuated. This hierarchy, as it exists between the coloniser and the colonised, reveals European superiority and marginalises the colonised culture. Hierarchy in language also perpetuates and distinguishes between classes in Egypt. The novel articulates the native upper-middle-class voice, the voice of a class economically allied with the coloniser.

On the other hand, using French language in a reconciliatory discourse could indicate a compromise. It illustrates that the transaction between postcolonial worlds is not a one-way process where the coloniser oppressed the colonised and silenced him/her in absolute terms. The narrative stresses the survival of the oppressed and gives both the coloniser and the colonised methods of speaking for themselves to express their feelings and speaking to each other to reconcile. As a result, new formations would arise from the conflicts between cultures, which would allow terminating binary

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[355] Tucker, 1986: 11

categories of the past and developing new models of cultural exchange and growth. Soueif does not neglect the Arabic language in this exchange as the novel is full of Arabic imagery and phrases indicating that the compromise should not wipe out the native language and culture. Zahran uses a similar strategy as her heroine speaks English and French fluently. Both languages are used as a medium of communication and expressing her feelings of alienation and exile. Alex notes,

> 'Her [Rayya's] English had a strange resonance. It was almost perfect with an accent that had Slavic undertones, not the usual accent with which Arabs speak English. I found out later that it was abhorrent to her to speak English or French like a native. She deliberately kept her accent so as to mark her foreignness, her rootless exile.[356]

The Map of Love pays more attention to the lower-middle and the lower classes at the end of the twentieth century through Amal. Amal's emotional closeness to the *Fellaheen* (peasants) foregrounds her serious attachment to the village and the land as an empowering source for coping with the dislocations of her private and public reality. Her friendship with the doorman's wife and with the female Fellaheen in the village allows space and opportunity for figures outside the privileged political and cultural elite to articulate their situation.[357]

Marriage, like language, is another form of cultural exchange in the narrative. On many incidents the novel suggests that Egyptian women are not suitable to be married to because of social restrictions. The novel suggests that at the turn of the century the English woman, intellectually, is considered a better wife for Sharif. He describes his

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[356] *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, 29-30
[357] Malak, 2000:156

first marriage to an Egyptian woman, 'Ya Ummi, I cannot live my life with a woman who has no key to my mind and who does not share my concern.'[358]

When his mother found his idea of marrying an English woman disturbing, he says,

> 'Mother, have mercy. Where would I have met an Egyptian woman to love her? Yes, I see them at family occasions, but to sit with one and talk to her – can this happen?'[359]

Due to the tradition of segregation between men and women, Sharif is unable to 'know' a woman before marrying her. He suggests that he should marry someone outside of his culture, as she would understand him better and would understand the hard times his nation is going through. He says,

> 'I need my partner to be someone to whom I can turn, confidant of her sympathy, believing her when she tells me I'm in the wrong, strengthened when she tells me I'm in the right. I want to love, and be loved back – but what I see is not love or companionship but a sort of transaction of convenience sanctioned by religion and society and I do not want it.'[360]

This is hypocritical as it reveals that women must live according to traditional values, and also be condemned for doing so. They are considered 'inferior' in the eyes of the Arab man who sees the European woman as a better companion than the local one because of male-perpetuated cultural restrictions on her role. The Arab woman *cannot* see the European man superior to the Arab, as that would be considered the ultimate defeat of the nation and would jeopardise all religious and cultural values, which she, and she alone, represents.

Male domination, however, is not exclusive to 'Third World' countries. This is manifested when the Egyptian Sharif and the English Cromer negotiate over Anna.

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[358] *The Map of Love*, 151
[359] ibid: 280
[360] ibid: 151

While Cromer strictly opposes Anna's marriage to Sharif and considers it a betrayal to the White civilisation, Sharif says,

> 'I think I understand something of what you feel. It would not have filled me with joy if my sister had wished to marry an Englishman. In fact I would probably have done everything I could to stop her.'[361]

Both men understand each other. Sharif can fall in love with any woman he chooses but his sister cannot have that choice. The Englishman can exploit 'native' women, but the white woman can be exploited only by him. This suggests that there is no difference between the two men when negotiations are about 'their' women and the preservation of their cultures.

The subjugation of women in European countries, however, appears to be marginalised or dismissed when the focus is on other power relations such as race, class, or religion. As a result, the figure of the native woman disappears either by patriarchy, imperialism or by both. She becomes a target of colonial and national discourses. The subjection or appropriation is important to the workings of the colony or the nation. Despite their differences, colonial and indigenous patriarchies often collaborated to keep women 'in their place.'[362] Be it 'civilised' or 'uncivilised,' patriarchy knows no boundary or nationality. It seems in context and necessary here to repeat Spivak's description of the position of the 'Third World' woman as she says,

> Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation.[363]

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[361] ibid: 321
[362] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 222
[363] Spivak, 1988: 306

Although both Eastern and Western women are relatively subjugated to traditions, imperialism and patriarchy, Soueif insists on their importance in the reconciliation between East and West. This is evident when Isabel and Amal discuss the etymology of Arabic words derived from 'mother' and 'father' concluding that the former 'goes into politics, religion, economics,'[364] which is to say all categories of history, while the latter has no etymological descent.[365]

4.5 Anna: The Agent of Reconciliation

Soueif states in an interview that as she wrote *The Map of Love*, she was interested in travel writing genre written by Englishwomen. She believes that the attitudes of these women varied from those who were with very set colonial attitudes to very broad-minded women who were willing to understand and adapt to different cultures. The latter opened themselves to other cultures, and in time their personalities evolved. For the purpose of reconciliation, Soueif creates a permissive lady traveller to introduce the Western reader to Egyptian ways and life styles outside colonial prejudices.[366]

The inequality of colonial domination cannot be addressed without risking the disintegration of the subject 'woman.' As race and class overlap to give Anna power, the fact that she is a woman reduces this power significantly. During the colonial period and after, most women suffered from oppression; political through colonisation and social through patriarchy. This, in turn, enables women to enjoy a common sisterhood that knows no boundaries. As Virginia Woolf declares: 'As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the

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[364] *The Map of Love*, 165
[365] Boccardi, 2004: 203
[366] Soueif, 2001: 103

whole world.'[367]

In 'White Women and Colonialism,' Jane Haggis claims that placing women in the history of colonialism and imperialism takes the texts of white women as literal accounts of their experiences, authentic and significant in their meaning. A meaning that is available directly to historians and provides comprehensible and valid, if only partial, accounts of the past. In colonial settings, the voice of the white woman is usually placed alongside with the voice of the white man's narrative to give it authenticity and significance, while the histories of the colonised whether male or female are suggested to be another matter that concerns the natives only.[368]

Anna, influenced by her father-in-law's ideas about the Empire, was receptive to liberal ideas of anti-colonial nationalism. Her friendship with Layla and her marriage to Sharif are two of the main cultural dialogues in the novel. Through Anna's character, the narrative negotiates the problem of difference across the boundaries of cultures. This is evident in Anna's attention to clothes and different cultural practices in Egypt.

Anna, through narrating both accounts, negates the generalisation that the white woman's voice agrees with the white man's. The reconciliatory discourse of the novel suggests that not every British person writes history and narrative within a colonial discourse to serve the Empire and that 'truth' is more important than history. Some white women recognised their inferiority as the weaker gender in their society so they were sympathetic towards natives in general and native women in particular, while

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[367] Woolf, Virginia, (1997-2002) *Journeywomen* downloaded on 24th March 2005 from http://www.journeywoman.com/bestbooks/bookreview_travel02.html

[368] Haggis, 2003: 163

others were authentic by simply recognising the unjust policies of Britain.[369]

The narrative gives women's voice, especially Anna's, a privileging factor as the primary analytical perspective of historical and personal accounts. Anna negates all false accounts of Egypt's 'inferiority.' The fact that she is British gives her voice authenticity in the West as the white woman's account of the East is seen as supplementary to the white man's. She supplies him with what he lacks. As a woman, she has the advantage of accessing 'closed' societies and veiled women in the harem. She provides him with information to the sealed part of the culture. The white woman's account is supposedly narrated through close observation while his mostly from his imagination. To construct a bridge between the two civilisations, Soueif undertakes the task of privileging gender and the voice of the white woman in an attempt to recover the past, elevate the status of women in history and set the historical record straight. Soueif suggests that Anna's account does not supplement but stands alone in the middle of the colonialist discourse of that time.

Anna manifests an inability to deal with the power relations of colonialism. She is portrayed as a victim of the imperialist white man. On many occasions, it is revealed that her power, as an upper-class British woman, is reduced significantly. She worries about what the British would think of her or her actions in Egypt. Thus, she sets boundaries for herself even when she does not like to because as a British Lady she is considered a front by which disgrace or honour is brought to her country. She says, '…I believe I did not disgrace the Empire!'[370] and '… neither she [Emily] or I will

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[369] See Lewis, 1996
[370] *The Map of Love*, 94

venture again into Old Cairo except under British guard!'[371] and after her abduction she says, 'For myself, the thought that holds most terror for me now is to become known in London as 'that Lady Anna Winterbourne who was abducted by the Arabs.'[372]

Anna narrates the past outside the colonial spectrum and sides with the national movement in Egypt. Soueif gives Anna's activities credibility on behalf of the nationalist cause with frequent references to pro-Egyptian figures such as Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (author of the *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* and a campaigner on behalf of Urabi and his fellow revolutionaries). She is portrayed as a prudent woman who does not deny her British self, and who is also aware of the Egyptian's identity and its right to exist. She asks her British friends to stop being ignorant about a society that exists in a land they are occupying. She says,

> '…and I do believe I am sensible – only I am sensible too of the wrong being done here and that there is a living world which people are refusing to see or even hear about. I know that this sensibility is born of my affection for my new friends but it is nonetheless trustworthy for that.'[373]

Further credibility is given to Anna as she does not give her point of view of the Empire and the Egyptians until she fully understands both sides and starts dealing closely with the locals. At the beginning of the novel, she refers to them as 'natives' or 'Arabs' whom she is detached from but very eager to mix with and understand. Even during her abduction, she is very calm and understanding, which is something rarely witnessed in real life. After forming a friendly relationship with Layla and her brother, although the circumstance through which they meet is not ideal to build a

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[371] ibid: 68
[372] ibid: 105
[373] ibid: 240

genuine close relationship, she, then, understands the horrors of the Empire and the good nature of the Egyptians. That is when she starts to refer to them as 'my friends.'

The narrative sends a message to condemn the imperialist white man and his misdeeds in the colonised countries by forming a marriage between the coloniser and the colonised through Anna and Sharif. This is also emphasised when Anna's first husband dies and is understood that the cause of his death is a result of the guilt he felt for what the Empire is doing in the colonies. Anna realises that the natives are not 'infants' and are not 'degraded.' On the contrary, they are educated and their country is not different from any other, apart from the Arab's way of dressing and their language. With the Egyptians, she learns that all they are after is what any nation is supposed to have: freedom. She says,

> '…and so I know now that what the 'talking classes' are demanding is not only an end to the British Occupation but that the country should be governed – like ours – by means of an elected Parliament and a Constitution.'[374]

By saying 'like ours,' Anna reveals that other nations have the right to exist and this right should be acknowledged even by the oppressors. She sees the natives' demands as legitimate and just as her own country is privileged to have them. By this statement, she reveals the true intentions of the occupation, the real nature of the occupied and what it means to be occupied.

Through Anna, Soueif also reconciles the white woman and the native one. Anna and Layla become friends and sisters-in-law sharing the same worries and joys. Layla becomes Anna's teacher and opens her eyes to Egyptian society. In this context, the

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[374] ibid: 159

idea of the native woman being relegated to an inferior background against which the white genders act out their historical and national roles is resisted.

Anna's medium with the locals is mainly French as she does not speak Arabic and they do not speak English. Therefore, Anna was only able to mix with upper-class Egyptians and her accounts refer to the educated elite. This emphasis on the upper-class has been mentioned previously when it was noted that the narrative excludes other social classes from the struggle towards independence and reconciliation. As mentioned in the previous section, the educated elite usually affiliate themselves with Western values and therefore are found amicable to the West. Disregarding other classes makes Anna's account not valuable enough as it does not draw a full picture of Egyptian society. In a letter to Sir Charles, she suggests that other social classes do not represent the culture that she is trying to understand, she says,

> '...and the only Natives we have to do with are the ones who serve us. I fancy it is somewhat like coming to England and meeting the servants and the shopkeepers and forming your ideas of English Society upon that. No, it is worse, for in England Society displays itself in public, so the stranger, even with entrance to it, knows it is there. Here, I have come to see, Society exists behind closed doors – but it is no less Society for that.'[375]

In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?,' Spivak notes that colonial texts tend to focus on and represent the educated sector of a colonised culture. She suggests that the focus on the elite colonised subject has paradoxically reaffirmed the position of the West as it is the voice that most approximates to colonial notions of what the Other is. Spivak argues that it is necessary to 'insist that the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.'[376] Because of focusing on one angle of Egyptian society, Anna's

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[375] ibid: 160
[376] Spivak, 1988: 79

texts do not demonstrate the whole reality of the culture. The reader also feels that her interpretation, as a white woman is given privileges and authority over and above the self knowledge of the locals. Although Layla and Amal are there, their voices echo Anna's along with the social and political circumstances.

As an historical and a reconciliatory narrative, the novel offers educational material to enlighten the reader and recover the historical and the social from Western prejudices. Anna gains knowledge about the Egyptian culture and educates the world about the unjust ruling of the British Empire, the rightful demands of the Egyptians, and cultural concepts manifested mainly in two concepts: the veil and the harem.

The West has always been disturbed and perplexed with these two cultural practices and came to a conclusion that the sole cause of Arab women's oppression is their religion. The West also expressed mixed feelings concerning these cultural practices. On one hand, the veil and the harem are symbols of oppression, and on another they are thought of as exotic and the subject of curiosity. Mabro notes,

> For centuries Europe has been both fascinated and repelled by the veil and the harem, symbols which, on the one hand, have prevented the observer from seeing and communicating with women and produced feelings of frustration and aggressive behaviour. On the other hand, they have provided men with a fantasy and dangled the promise of exotic and erotic experiences with the 'beauty behind the veil' and the 'light of the harem.' Female observers…have been as ambiguous, as hostile and as Eurocentric as men in this respect, if for different reasons.[377]

This confusion is still articulated today. For example, Arab women are usually portrayed, in books, cards, pictures, etc. with a sharp contrast. It is either a veiled woman in black showing her eyes only, which is considered 'mysterious' and

[377] Mabro, 1991: 2

'mystifying,' or it is an erotic sexual one. Anna reinterprets Western fantasies and misunderstandings in an attempt to correct the image of the Arab woman and to give it a new dimension. *The Map of Love* explains and reinterprets the politics, the history and the traditions that caused much confusion across the centuries. Through Anna's character, the narrative brings attention to clothes and different virtues in the Egyptian culture in an attempt to cross boundaries and achieve reconciliation. Through her diaries and letters, Anna reveals her personal experience with the veil and the harem far from prejudice and discrimination.

4.5.1 The 'Liberating' Veil

> *'...a mere dark curtain is enough to provide an imaginary shield of safety.'* [378]

The focus on the veil in the narrative is not surprising as it is a sign and a cultural symbol that proved to be powerful over the centuries. False generalisations have always been attached to it, even today the West is still alarmed, frightened and threatened by it. To conquer a land is not necessarily in terms of military action only, it is also established in terms of epistemological superiority,[379] as epistemology is rooted in the world's power relations and defines the 'global standards of civilisation.' The veiled woman is made to constitute an object for a branch of knowledge and a branch of power through which a nation can be conquered. Conquering women is equal to conquering the land. Yegenoglu notes that,

> ... The case or tropology of the 'veil' is not simply a signifier of a cultural habit or identity that can be liked or disliked, be good or bad, but 'in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the

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[378] Darwish, 1995: 7
[379] Said, 1995 (1978): 32

> other' for a subject, i.e., for the European subject in our case, it signifies the production of an 'exteriority' a 'target or threat,' which makes possible for that subject to 'postulate a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base.' This enables him to produce himself vis-à-vis an other while simultaneously erasing the very process of this production.[380]

Yegenoglu argues that the veil can be seen as the resisting data of modern power whose aim is to reconstruct the world in terms of a transparency provided by knowledge as power. Veiled women are classified as a group of people or rather they are objects and subject identified by a discourse as problems to be dealt with and objects to be known and thus controlled.[381]

The veil created an obstacle for knowledge hence the veiled woman became an obstacle to the coloniser's visual control. He cannot see what is behind the veil and therefore is alarmed and threatened by it. The veil also signifies a reverse of superiority positions as it carries the advantage of seeing without being seen. The narrative demonstrates powerful element to the veil that usually disturbs Western cultures. To reinstate his power, the coloniser calls the veil oppressive and unjust to women, and claims that it is his duty to 'liberate' and 'modernise' the veiled 'uncivilised' and 'backward' woman from 'oppressive' cultural symbols. In reality, he seeks to gain and assert his control over the local woman and his superiority over the culture.

Anna acknowledges the local's right to practice their traditions and beliefs and shows empathy and understanding towards their values. While she is still neutral about her feelings towards Egyptians, mixing with the British community and going to their

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[380] Yegenoglu, 1998: 41
[381] ibid: 41

parties, Anna demonstrates conformity to local values. She notes in a letter to Sir Charles,

> 'I chose my violet silk, which Emily did not think was grand enough and I own it probably was not, but as I knew that Moslem notables were to be present I thought it would provide me with adequate covering and would not cause offence. We are, after all, in their country.'[382]

Anna acknowledges that Egypt belongs to the Egyptians and that foreigners should be sensitive towards local traditions. She expresses her experience with the veil on many occasions. She covers her face when she travels in disguise. She also wears it on other occasions while she is married to Sharif out of respect to him and his culture. Anna, through her experience, transforms the veil from its traditional meaning into a concept of freedom. She changes its significance of a symbol of 'oppression' to a sign of liberation. She says, 'it is a most liberating thing, this veil. While I was wearing it, I could look wherever I wanted and nobody could look back at me.'[383] However, mystery and secretiveness is still attached to it. She is delighted that she could be invisible to others while able to see everything around her, she says, 'nobody could find out who I was.'[384]

More than being a sign of liberation and power, the veil is represented as an act of subversion. Anna rebels as she enjoys wearing the veil and realises the freedom it gives to women. This act challenges Orientalist scholarship regarding the veil. Anna taunts the imperialist white man by being a white woman behind the veil. Not only did her appearance change as she wore it, but her personality was also adjusted to this dress and its symbolic value. It made her see her surroundings from an Egyptian

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[382] *The Map of Love*, 94
[383] ibid: 195
[384] ibid: 195

perspective. Anna, being already the 'inferior' gender, becomes a symbol of the 'inferior' and 'other' race. She says,

> '...but the oddest thing of all was that I suddenly saw them [her British friends] as bright, exotic creatures, walking in a kind of magical space, oblivious to all around them; at ease, chattering to each other as though they were out for a stroll in the park, while the people, pushed aside, watched and waited for them to pass. There was another man with them...I surmise it must be Mr Wilfrid Blunt...I had been wishing to meet him these five months and now he walked past me – and I was invisible.'[385]

Isabel shares Anna her feelings towards the veil and other cultural symbols. When she travels with Amal to Tawasi[386] she avoids being disrespectful to the locals. She dislikes being labelled as the foreigner who is not considerate of other cultures' values. She wears a long skirt, loose long-sleeved top and a scarf tied over the hair. The narrator says,

> 'She had worked it for herself. She had seen the group of tourists in the old city, in the Bazaar, their naked flesh lobsterlike in the heat, the locals either staring or averting their eyes as they passed by.'[387]

Feminine liberation is not simply just a matter of expressing sexuality but also having the freedom to express it in a way determined by the woman herself. Eastern patriarchy forced women to veil and Western patriarchy forced women to reveal. Both are two extreme forms of domination that suited men's demands, their cultural needs and imperialist designs. However, the oppressive nature of the veil as a form of patriarchal suppression of Arab women should not be ignored. By expressing only a positive image of the veil, the narrative disregards the opposition of many women to it. Both Anna and Isabel choose to wear the veil as visitors to an Islamic culture. They wear it and take it off whenever it suits them, which does not make them

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[385] ibid: 194-5
[386] Tawasi is a village in Egypt.
[387] *The Map of Love*, 165

representatives of this very culturally specific concept. Both women take the role of justifying, rationalising and above all expressing approval of the veil and Egyptian women's life style. The reader does not know whether Amal is veiled or not as she does not express any feelings towards this matter although she and Layla are the capable ones of giving accurate accounts of Egyptian women's lives, expressing approval or disapproval. In a 'Third World' country, the issue of women's emancipation should be decided by 'Third World' women outside the extremes of their patriarchal society on one side and imperialism on the other.

Even when the veil is attacked in the novel by reformers such as Qasim Amin, these attacks were made by men to suit patriarchal demands. They demanded for a 'new Eastern woman.' One that is educated, unveiled, westernised, but not *too* westernised. She would still keep her feminine 'virtues' according to Eastern values. She should be able to be a good mother and wife because she, now, has the privilege of being educated. Yet she should maintain the 'spirit' of the nation, which means that she does not choose but her life is chosen and perpetuated by men to suit their needs. These intellectuals, stressing that civilisation means westernisation, reinstate the inferiority of their culture and emphasise the superiority of the West. Yegenoglu claims, '…it was through such modernisation attempts that the imperial divide was reproduced within the Third World and hence sustained the legacies of Eurocentric thought.'[388]

The narrative shows that some women were happy with the suggested reforms and abandoned the veil. Others, mostly the lower-middle and lower classes, were struck

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[388] ibid: 133

by them. They could not comprehend the idea of not covering themselves and renouncing an inherited tradition. Mabrouka, the servant at Sharif's house, says, 'Not wear the veil? We live and we see!...They [West] have their way and we have ours. No respectable woman would go out of her house without the veil.'[389]

4.5.2 The Harem

The harem is another Eastern system that disturbed and intrigued the West. The word 'harem' means the segregated part of the house to which strange men do not have access. It is the place where female relatives of a man share much of their time together with their children, enabling them to have easy access to other women in their community. The Western understanding of it, however, was different. The harem was where exotic and sensual women were gathered together waiting for their master to come and choose one of them to fulfil his desires. Many travellers have written about the conditions they saw in the 'harem' describing women as depraved, degraded and uneducated, and therefore, bad mothers who brought up degenerated children.

In the colonial culture the idea took hold that the Arab woman should be 'liberated' from this kind of practice by the 'noble' Western man. The harem, like the veil, meant that there is something hidden, invisible from the coloniser, something he is curious to know. His curiosity and prejudgments made him draw pictures in his imagination about the harem and women's conduct behind closed doors. Since strange men were not allowed in there, only women were, one wonders where colonialists got the information from. It seems that the colonialist either employed his imagination or collaborated with Western women to supply him with false information. Judy Mabro

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[389] ibid: 375-6

(1991) quotes a large number of accounts on the harem written by both Western men and women, although this social system was not widely spread in the Arab World. These Orientalists were mainly using their imagination to fill a gap about the hidden side of the East in order to fulfil their desire for an exotic journey in that part of the world. One woman, referred to by Mabro and mentioned in *The Map of Love*, who seemed to be correcting these travellers' accounts, is Lucy Duff Gordon who spent ample time talking to Egyptians throughout the seven years she spent in Egypt in the late nineteenth century.[390] She, like Anna, sympathised with the Arabs and believed in their cause. She ended up living in Egypt until she died.

As a woman, Anna's activities are limited by both the British community in Egypt and the Egyptian culture itself. She wanted to travel around Egypt and understand the culture by herself without any interference from her British friends. She wanted to avoid any unpleasant confrontation with British and Egyptian men. She wished to form her own opinion and to decide if the locals were really 'degraded' and 'uncivilised' like her British friends describe them to be. Anna says, 'I would have remained within the world I knew. I would have seen things through my companions' eyes, and my mind would have been too occupied in resisting their impressions to establish its own.'[391] Anna decides to travel in disguise, dressed as an Englishman, Frenchman, and a veiled Egyptian woman.

Before travelling to Egypt, Anna read literature that described Arabs as exotic and oppressive people. Initially, her abduction incident proved to her that Arabs are in fact like they are described in travellers' books. She says,

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[390] Mabro, 1991: 24
[391] *The Map of Love*, 212

> 'What had she [Layla] to do with my abduction? I had been abducted as a man and in the Oriental tales I have read it has happened that a Houri or a princess has ordered the abduction of a young man to whom she has taken a fancy. She would have brought him to her castle beyond the Mountains of the Moon, and there she would offer him marriage.'[392]

As a result of the abduction, Lady Anna had the chance to finally meet an Egyptian Muslim woman, Layla. She always wanted to meet the women of Egypt, but they were as she says 'behind the grille.' Layla was her chance to understand Egypt. Anna went out with her and visited women friends, and received women visitors at her house. Soon, as the narrative suggests, Anna became a member of the harem system. Her letters and diaries were written out of personal experience. They challenge traditional notions of the Orient, represent a comparison between Western and Arab cultures, and condemn the West for the injustice they caused in the colonies in general and Egypt in particular. Her texts reveal that the harem system does not necessarily mean a non-monogamous system. It also does not refer to uneducated women who are degraded and oppressed. They are, in fact, educated women who fight for the liberation of their nation and uphold ideas about the emancipation of the Egyptian woman.

The colonialist's assumption and prejudices about the harem system are displayed when Anna and Sharif try to register their marriage in Britain through Cromer. After trying to talk Anna out of it, Cromer says, 'I want you [Sharif] to sign an undertaking that you will not take another wife while you remain married to Lady Anna.'[393]

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[392] ibid: 134
[393] ibid: 322

Sharif anticipated that this would happen as he is aware of the reputation Eastern men have in Europe. He adds a particular clause in the marriage contract before confronting Cromer that states: 'in the event of Sharif Basha availing himself of his legal right to take another wife, the divorce would take effect...'[394] He adds this clause in case any British man tries to call off the marriage by claiming that the marriage and the effects it might entail are not suitable for a lady in Anna's position and rank.

The focus on the harem in Western writing gives the impression that polygamy is almost exclusively Arab. Billie Melman argues in *Women's Orients*,

> The Greeks had sequestered females in separate *gynecea*. The Hebrews had been polygamists. Evangelical missionaries who, throughout the nineteenth century, preached the abolition of the harem well knew that the Scriptures abounded with examples of plural marriages. Indeed nowhere in the Old or New Testaments is polygamy explicitly prohibited...'[395]

Soueif, through Anna normalises and humanises the harem system. Anna becomes a mediator between the Egyptian and British cultures. She helps the Egyptian nationalists and supports the education of women. She reveals her experience as part of the harem and challenges claims that women are oppressed in such a social system. Not only does she support the Egyptians, but she reveals that she is ashamed of her own country and its prejudices against the locals.

Anna's representation of Egypt is characterised with a sense of familiarity and sympathy with the 'other.' This sense of familiarity, however, is exaggerated to accommodate Anna's love to Sharif and Egypt. An incident in the novel shows that

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[394] ibid: 319
[395] Melman, 1995: 60

although familiar with the ways of the harem, Anna is not comfortable telling her friends in Britain about it. After she marries Sharif, attitudes of her closest relatives and friends changed. She says,

> 'Sir Charles writes to me, but not so often. And after the first letter in which he wished me happiness – 'although, my dear, I cannot confidently expect it' – he writes without mention of my new condition, so that I feel constrained not to mention any particulars of my life to him and restrict myself to reports on my Arabic and the garden and such political news as I hear from my husband. Caroline writes from time to time with news of our friends and she expresses curiosity about my life but I find in myself a strange unwillingness to provide a detailed picture of 'life in the Harem.'[396]

Anna realises that even those who are sympathetic towards Egyptian nationalism in Britain might not be familiar with Egyptian traditions. She understands that there are certain untranslatable cultural values that are difficult to describe and be understood in a letter. A detailed picture of the harem, in this case, might confirm the Arab's 'inferiority' and cause resentment to their values.

4.6 Anna and Sharif: Romance or an Oriental Fable?

Soueif's attempts to reconcile East and West are manifested through two love affairs: Anna and Sharif, and Isabel and Omar. The narrative suggests building a nation that prospers outside colonialism and imperialism to create an ideal life. Anna and Sharif's relationship fuels a desire for domestic happiness, dreams of national prosperity, and cross-cultural exchange.

Through the marriage of Anna and Sharif, the narrative transforms them from Egyptian nationalist into a husband, and from a British coloniser into a wife. This

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[396] *The Map of Love*, 354

brings a humanistic notion to the struggle between coloniser and colonised and ends the white man's legitimacy in the colonised land. It keeps the meaning of nationalism as it is, as Sharif stays committed to his values and to Egypt's independence. It, however, changes the meaning of colonialism into romance. Soueif attempts to change the base that marks the relationship between East and West and as a hierarchal one, and transforms political conflicts into love affairs between both civilisations.

The love story, however, is too simplistic for this purpose to be accomplished. It is difficult to believe that a strong woman like Anna and a very powerful nationalist, like Sharif, would lead such a simplistic life. Their relationship is too perfect and implausible. Their love is unshakable yet they hardly know each other. Anna's assimilation into the Egyptian life style, which she accomplishes with ease, is equally unbelievable. The realities of the two cultures are missed in this relationship. If Anna experienced any kind of difficulties in assimilating, the relationship would have been more authentic and plausible. Her desire to love everything in Egyptian life, traditions, Egyptian traditional dress, and the way she spends most of the day weaving tapestry gives the romance no subtleties and does not provide depth to this very well-written historic novel.

The love affair has three alternative interpretations. First, it can negate the dialogue Soueif wishes for and instead legitimise British colonisation in Egypt. The marriage gives Anna legitimacy in Egypt not only as a Briton/coloniser but also as Sharif's wife. Although she is prudent and sensible, in the eyes of the public she is still an English woman, which equals coloniser. This is noticed in the objections Sharif initially faced from his mother, friends and the public. Two incidents in the novel

reveal the political and social impact of this marriage on him. At a wedding an English man, Milton Bey, approaches Sharif for the first time to speak to him. In surprise, Sharif thinks to himself as the narrator says, 'But the man has never spoken to him before; why come up so publicly to greet him? Is it being said now, of him, that he is a friend of the British?'[397]

On his way home that same night, Sharif gets another surprise, or rather a shock, that makes him furious. He takes a carriage and gives the driver the directions, the driver responds by saying, 'Near Beit el-Ingliziyya?[398] Sharif in fury responds,

> 'What did you say?...It is called the house of Baroudi, ya hayawan[399]…not the House of the Englishwoman.'
> The Driver replies: 'But there is an Englishwoman living there…It's well known: she fell in love with the Basha and married him. It's a known story.'[400]

A second interpretation of the love story would be viewing it as an Oriental tale that lacks both subtlety and depth. A fair beautiful Lady from the West travels to Egypt and meets a handsome prince/Basha, a 'noble savage,' who sweeps her off her feet from the first sight. Melman defines the Oriental philosophical tale as one that is set in the East. It is a combination of rhetorical use of citation and of ethnographic literature. These tales belong to a historical genre that evolved during the Enlightenment period. The theme of these tales is usually cultural differentiation and the relativeness of moral systems and social structures.[401]

The circumstances through which Anna and Sharif meet resemble an Orientalist

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[397] ibid: 367
[398] ibid: 368. Beit el-Ingliziyya means the house of the English woman.
[399] *Ya hayawan* means you animal.
[400] *The Map of Love*, 368
[401] Melman, 1995: 70

imagination of an exotic land and people. This is evident in Anna's abduction and what she makes of it when she says it is like the Oriental tales she used to read where a native princess abducts the man she desires. Like Mills and Boon, the two fall in love without knowing each other. This gives the romance no value and downplays the historical element of the narrative. A dialogue between Anna and Sharif,

> 'Me, weren't you afraid of me? The wicked Pasha who would lock you up in his harem and do terrible things to you?
> 'What terrible things?'
> 'You should know. They're in your English stories. Calling in my black eunuchs to tie you up –
> 'Do you have any?'
> 'You bad, bad woman – but what can one expect from an infidel? You dress in men's clothes, frighten poor Sabir to within an inch of his life, then throw yourself at the neck of the first Arab you meet –' [402]

The final interpretation is that the love tale can be a reverse of power and exploitation.

Instead of the coloniser exploiting the native woman, the colonised is exploiting the white woman. Sharif is fascinated by Anna's 'violet eyes,' 'liberated hair' and 'fair skin.' He desires her, but not her Englishness. He wants to make her part of him, part of his culture and harem. Their marriage, however, must be resisted for the white civilisation to survive, and must be carried out for Eastern civilisation to claim victory. The narrator says,

> 'And all his [Sharif] doubts and questioning have disappeared. She is no longer 'Lady Anna, the Englishwoman'. She is Lady Anna, his wife. 'Anna Hanim, Haram Sharif Basha al-Baroudi. He smiles to himself as he soaks in the bath, as wrapped in a loose white towelling robe he walks around the house he will leave tomorrow, after so many years. It is strange to feel so happy, so calmly happy. Even in that wretched meeting with Cromer he had not found it in his heart to hate him! Ah, but how Cromer had hated him! And hated having to sit there with the marriage contract in front of him. Sharif Basha grins. And she had been magnificent – not one word of English, not one

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[402] *The Map of Love*, 154.For more examples see: pp. 134, 214 and 286

concession.'[403]

In an interview Ahdaf Soueif says that she was interested in creating a romantic hero, like the Byronic Hero and all the characters that we find in Mills and Boon stories – tall, dark and handsome. She goes on saying,

> And this [in Mills and Boon novels] hero is very often kind of Eastern, but he isn't ever really Eastern. And I've read novels and stories where he's meant to be Egyptian and he really isn't at all. He is completely fake. Or you have somebody, they have to make him Christian because they can't go into the whole Muslim bit, but yet he is called Ali or Mohammed because that's what Easterners are called – very odd, pastichey like that. And I thought, what if I make a hero who's larger than life, who's somebody I would think, Wow! – and he's real, genuine Egyptian, of that time, with the concerns of that period, and so on. So that was behind the making of Sharif al-Baroudi.'[404]

This kind of a hero is too simplistic for this kind of narrative. Indeed, such an historic nationalistic novel needs a 'larger than life' hero, but how could such a hero be described as 'real' and 'genuine' when he is an imitation of Mills and Boon characters? Nationalism and Romance go together, but Mills and Boon heroes make the nationalistic element of the novel and the historical trivial and obsolete. The only thing that distinguishes Sharif from Mills and Boon heroes, as Soueif suggests, is that he is Muslim, while they are Christian.

The love story between Isabel and Omar, although not elaborated on as much as the previously mentioned one, is not that far from reality. Isabel is blindly in love with Omar. Even when he does not love her in return she still pursues him. In this story there is no remarkable meeting, just a simple acquaintanceship from a dinner party. The affection that exists between the two is never on a very secure footing. Yet it is a

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[403] ibid: 324
[404] Soueif, 2001: 102

love story, and Isabel's stubborn determination to love Omar is realistic. There are parallels between Anna and Isabel, they were both married before to a man from their 'own' culture, they both travel to Egypt, they both try to learn Arabic, and both fall in love with an Egyptian man. More importantly, both women come to Egypt as blank pages ready to be written on. Isabel has a child with Omar as Anna does with Sharif, and Omar, like Sharif, is killed for his political beliefs. There are subtle ironies and twists in this love affair, however. The most alarming is the question of Isabel's parentage. The narrative suggests that Omar might be Isabel's father since he was her mother's lover at some point in the past. Soueif does not wholly conclude this issue leaving the reader a bit mystified. In 'History as Gynealogy,' Boccardi explains that,

> Although apparently due to chance only, this almost incestuous doubling up of genealogical relations in the modern story and the repetition of fates of the members of each generation simply perpetuate and reinforce an existing family pattern. They become yet another instance of recurrence of the past into the present.[405]

Although Isabel and Omar were open to different cultures and willing to accommodate to different settings, their relationship is far more complicated than Anna and Sharif's. With Isabel and Omar the boundaries in conflict are not fixed and nationalism to Omar does not end with Egypt's geographical boarders. His political concerns are more regional than Sharif's. He is a member of the Palestinian National Congress and a ferocious opponent of the Oslo Accord. For his activities in the United States he earns the derogatory badges of the 'Molotov Maestro' and 'Kalashinkov Conducter.'[406] This resulted in having many enemies around the world and turned him into a solitary figure. Amal contemplates,

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[405] Boccardi, 2004: 199-200
[406] *The Map of Love*, 17

> 'How else could he have ended up – living where he lives, doing what he does – except alone in that no-man's-land between East and West?'[407]

Omar fights a bigger battle on the side of Iraqi's, Palestinians, and the whole region against imperialism and Zionism, while Isabel is a fresh American woman who is doing a project on how an ancient country like Egypt views the Millennium. The narrative suggests the failure of marriage as a cross-cultural exchange at the end of twentieth century. Omar, before his affair with Isabel, marries an American woman but the marriage falls apart. It is not clear whether Amal married an English man or a man who lived in England, but her marriage falls apart too and she returns to her roots in Egypt. The novel suggests that this failure arises from the difficulty of coordination between the foreign culture and the native one. This coordination becomes impossible when both cultures fail to understand each other and reconcile their past. If love binds people together, politics often destroys them. Omar expresses what it means to be a nationalist Arab in a foreign land and reveals the reasons behind his divorce with his American wife. He says, 'We both discovered I was an Arab.'[408] With this statement, it is clear that, considering the current political situation, reconciliation is far from being attained even, perhaps, through love.

Through the realistic love affair of the present time, Soueif destroys the fable of the past. The reality in Omar and Isabel's relationship suggests that ghosts of the past must be exorcised, myths destroyed and new ones created. With Omar's death and the birth of his child Sharif, the narrative suggests the continuity of the family line and the

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[407] ibid: 515
[408] ibid: 334

sequence of history leaving the reader confused between the past and the present as a sign of continuity.

4.7 Conclusion

The Map of Love is a postcolonial narrative of Britain and Egypt in the nineteenth century. It is a story of trans-cultural love affairs woven into a valuable historical context. The word 'map' in the title suggests political boundaries of nations. By 'love,' the author attempts to create a world that is not charged with hate and resentment of different political and cultural entities. Love does not only mean romance here, but love of country, nation, sensual pleasures, family, friends, and love between the living and the dead. *The Map of Love* suggests a new domain of sovereignty that would include the whole world rather than divide it into two parts: East/West. In 1997, Amal contemplates, 'When we [Amal and Isabel] sit and talk on my balcony we are – if I let myself be fanciful – soothing the wounds of our ancestors.'[409]

Soueif does not deny the tension within the Egyptian society with its different classes, the effect of capitalism and Islamist groups, and between East and West. Through acknowledging these tensions, she develops a narrative with a reconciliatory discourse, in an attempt to intervene in history for the purpose of resolving conflicts, since resolving the past is important for a dialogue to take place.

The fictional characters and the genealogical framework are the bridge through which a dialogue between the two civilisations is framed. Family love and common

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[409] ibid: 104

ancestors bind both civilisations. Their love for each other is portrayed to promote social and political change. The importance of romantic narrative lies in the solidarity, common identity and the sense of destiny that it forms.

Reconciliatory genre has been the focus of many postcolonial and literary writers recently, considering the current political predicaments. Soueif suggests in the novel that reconciliation can be achieved if the East observes the Western ways, and selectively adopting what is compatible with its own values. The West, in turn, should overcome its own prejudices and try to understand other cultures outside the hierarchal realm.

Soueif portrays women travellers in Egypt as prudent and sensible, and rejects the coloniser/colonised dichotomy in favour of a better understanding of the coloniser/colonised experience. Anna's life in Egypt, her cross-cultural experiences and above all her marriage to Sharif are all attempts on Soueif's behalf to bring sympathy and substance to the novel. She takes Anna's diaries and letters beyond being a series of history lessons by narrating Anna's personal life. Soueif makes use of her knowledge of history, nationalism, and politics and combines them with her awareness of the Western culture and how the Western reader might interpret the text in order to create his/her own counter-narrative.

The narrative is also a feminist manifestation of the historic novel as it focuses on the female family line. It points out the centrality of female inheritance and maternal line as a constructive alternative to patriarchal versions of historical transmission. The novel, however, does not focus on the emancipation of the Arab woman as a necessity

to the liberation of the nation. Ahdaf Soueif, in an article published in the *Guardian* suggests that liberating the nation comes first. She says, 'Once there was a thriving Arab women's movement. Right now, survival is our political act.'[410] The novel also excludes the religious discourse from the national one suggesting a separation that is rarely made between Islam and nationalism. Even when the narrative discusses the veil, it excludes its religious side and focuses only on its traditional meaning. The following chapter will attempt to focus on how Islam, women and land are portrayed by the Palestinian Zeina Ghandour. Ghandour's *The Honey* offers a mystical interpretation of Islamic values suggesting that, contrary to what is believed, religious discourse is not committed to the oppression of women or to Islamic 'extremism.'

[410] Soueif, 2003

Chapter Five

The Honey: Politics, Sexuality, Mysticism and Visions of the Veil

> *There must be the desire, the will, and the true freedom to reverse oneself, to accept thereby the risks of rupture and discontinuity; for whether one looks to see where and when he began, or whether he looks in order to begin now, he cannot continue as he is.* [411]

5.1 Introduction

The above quotation refers to Said's definition of a 'new beginning.' He suggests that people should have the desire to start a new era in which freedom and innovation is part of. In a world full of chaos, hatred and confusion, people should try to elevate themselves and resist rigid dogmas and restrictive values in order to live in a better world. The novel in question, in this chapter, seeks this very same beginning. It urges people to stop being compliant adults in a restrictive society through acts of rebellion, disruption and dissent.

The Honey by Zeina B. Ghandour is a novel that sets out to explore the multi-layered signification of religious, national and patriarchal discourses which contextualise the lives of Arab women and men. The narrative demonstrates a number of intertwined elements in the relationship between women, patriarchy, nation and occupation. It articulates a creative dissent that works within the politics of transgression based on politics, sex and mysticism. The resulting mixture of these three elements is a challenge to norms and platitudes. Hager Ben Driss in 'The Unholy Trinity' defines the literature of dissent by saying,

> This literature combines the politics and poetics of resistance and transgression, as it takes issue with every form of opportunism, smugness, and coercion and develops ways of undermining power structures and their machinery. While not necessarily

[411] Said,1997, 34

> targeting systems of political exploitation, neo-patriarchies and totalitarianism, the literature, holds authoritarianism suspect and destabilises its systems. It also probes into other forms of authority and questions their presence in ways that are not completely free from contaminations. On many occasions, the literature of dissent becomes a medium that is also saturated with the politics of its target.[412]

Al-Musawi argues that the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the exploiter and the exploited is not a static one. Power relations change and multiply depending on the context. Postcolonial literature makes use of this discrepancy to enhance its voicing of the marginalised. Dissent in literature unfolds a variety of discursive strategies and debates feudal and patriarchal practices in society. It revolves as a counteractive discourse of oblique criticism, ambivalence, resentment and disenchantment to develop its own strategies of subversion. Al-Musawi notes that dissent narrative 'reconstructs the past to address the present. Their main focus is centred on such characters as rogues, ascetics, and rebels, whose mission in life is to challenge unjust authority.'[413]

The narrative of dissent entails opposition to the status quo. This is manifested through poetic discursive strategies or through recreation of creative mystery.[414] These strategies enable the postcolonial novel to have many accentuations and voices while striving to problematise its engagement with tradition and issues of democracy and repression. *The Honey* voices dissent using a poetic voice and a mystical discourse. It demonstrates an interesting case of textual combat in which politics, sex and mysticism are exploited for subversion and resistance. It focuses on sexuality, Sufism and mystical interpretations of the veil among other traditions as strategies of

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[412] Driss, 2004: 72
[413] Al-Musawi, 2003: 257-8
[414] ibid: 278

involvement and at the same time alienation from the reality of occupation and the corrupt political situation in Palestine.

Mysticism in narratives of dissent, Toril Moi notes in a different context, is an experience of the disappearance of subject/object opposition. This might appeal to a woman writer whose subjectivity is already denied and repressed by patriarchal discourse. She continues by saying that mysticism 'seems to have formed the one area of high spiritual endeavour under patriarchy where women could and did excel more frequently than men.'[415] It gives women the chance to speak and act in a public way. The mystic self-representation escapes the patriarchal order that is imposed on women as it makes use of theology. The mystic experience comes to reflect God with all his glory and expresses divine love. This opens a space for women where they can unfold their pleasure, though still circumscribed by male discourse.[416]

This chapter examines politics, sex and mysticism as portrayed in *The Honey*. The first section shall focus on *The Honey* as a narrative that sets out to challenge dichotomies that mark power relations between male/female and oppressor/oppressed. Through its representations, it negates the fact that gender roles in their present image are Islamic and stresses that patriarchy and the misinterpretation of Islam are the sources of oppression in Arab societies. The second section will discuss the phenomenon of the veil. It will focus on three Muslim women's accounts of the veil as opposed to Western or male views of this politically charged tradition. Discussing three different novels, including *The Honey*, from three different backgrounds and

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[415] Moi, 2001 (1985): 135
[416] ibid: 136

settings will give the analysis a wider and a more diverse view in attempt to avoid partiality.

5.2 Mystified Politics: Rebellion and Innovation

The loss of Palestine is the most scorching theme in literature written by Arab writers. Al-Musawi claims that the humiliation felt by the Arabs, after the loss of Palestine in 1967, resulted in literature that ventures in a double narrative in an attempt to search for the nation's lost identity in the middle of the loss of land and corruption of governments. One narrative tackles the roots of the political tragedy and another tackles social corruption and misery. This pioneering stage, Al-Musawi suggests, enticed writers to search for methods and techniques to deal with a complex reality. He comments that,

> … the urgency and the immediacy entangle them in poetic techniques, rhetoric, grand and mythical architexts, and analogy. In due time, the burgeoning consciousness acts on the creative to go beyond intellectualized responses or the early ones of mere registration or overt documentation. This consciousness entails attention to detail human desires and practices that could have been bypassed by narratives of great cultural and ideological visions.[417]

Zeina B. Ghandour narrates a wasted Palestine, where images of the self and the homeland are entangled. Although Ghandour starts the narrative with a promise, saying, 'I want to speak with a non-poetic voice, I want to tell it how it is,' the novel is highly poetical and lyrical. It is a multi-layered story set in an oasis village in contemporary Palestine, set against the political backdrop of the Israeli occupation. The narrative unfolds over a period of 24 hours in segments separated by the intervals between the five daily prayers. The narrative constitutes of five sections. The title of

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[417] Al- Musawi, 2003: 26

each section refers to a crime against the Sacred Law of Shari'a and portrays a character that symbolises what is considered a sin in the dominant culture. Ironically, only the title of the last section, which is narrated by the Honeyman, suggests holiness and fear of God when the character portrayed is a rapist.

The narrative revolves around a village *muezzin*'s daughter, Ruhiya, who breaches an Islamic taboo by performing the call to the dawn prayer as her father lies on his deathbed. While she performs the call to prayer, her childhood love, Yehya, who has recently embraced fundamentalist politics, sets off on a suicide mission with his friend Eid. Ruhiya's sweet-voiced *adhan*, which shocks the villagers, reaches Yehya just in time to spur him to change his course, running off instead of detonating the explosives strapped onto him, while only a few minutes earlier Eid completes his mission.[418]

The very same day, a foreign journalist, Maya, hears about the two incidents involving Eid and Ruhiya. She travels to the village to uncover the stories, but is more interested in the girl who had the courage to defy divine doctrines. Maya, however, encounters a wall of silence when nobody would speak to her about the incident. Instead she searches inside herself for answers with the encouragement of a young girl called Asrar. Each character is one piece of a complex puzzle. As it gradually, but not completely or necessarily meaningfully, unfolds, it reveals a history of rape, incest and violence told successively in five characters. Each character's name symbolises their narrative destinies in thematic chapters of liberation and suicide.[419]

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[418] See Gabriel, 2000
[419] See Gabriel, 2000

The Honey deconstructs the discourse of patriarchy, religion and the ideologies of the dominant politics by undermining the philosophy they assert and the hierarchal realm on which they rely. It does this by identifying the rhetoric that produces the supposed basis of the argument, the kēy element or underlying premise. In his book, *On Deconstruction*, Jonathan Culler states that to deconstruct the opposition is to reverse the hierarchal realm. He stresses that, '[t]he practitioner of deconstruction works within the system but in order to breach it.'[420]

The novel expresses a number of discursive strategies, Sufi beliefs and sexuality to provoke dissent against upholding rigid traditions. Characters portrayed in *The Honey* work within the dominant system; they lay out the rules and the laws. They are, however, very difficult to pin down as they construct and destroy themselves and their surroundings in a continuous movement of doubt and self-critique. With reference to all segments of the narrative, this section will focus on the first two, Ruhiya's song and Yehya's journey, as they demonstrate this notion of rebellion and innovation. The characters and the themes conveyed in both segments depict the notion of deconstruction and rebellion set against the dominant culture be it the political, the patriarchal, or the sexual. The other segments of novel manifest the importance of healing political and social wounds as a necessity for co-existence.

Like all segments in the narrative, these two derive their titles from very important concepts in Islamic *shari'a*. The first is *Bid 'a* which the novel translates to the reader, as identified in *shari 'a*: a 'deviant act; the irreverent breach of a sacred tradition.' The deviant act referred to here is Ruhiya singing the *adhan* of dawn prayer to the

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[420] Culler, 2003: 86

whole village and the surrounding areas. This act changes her life and Yehya's fate, challenges the whole community and the existing order of patriarchy and brings to attention many disturbing issues in the community. Fatima Mernissi defines the term by saying,

> *Bid'a* is 'innovation.' It is the capacity of the individual to change his or her fate, life and thoughts about people and things, and to act critically in accordance with one's own assessment of the situation. *Bid'a* is considered as a deadly sin in Islamic orthodoxy. *Bid 'a* is not only error, it is a crime, in that one steps out of the 'right path' traced out and organised by the sacred law of the group. It is deviating from the straight path, *tariq al-mustaqim*, and is dangerous not only because innovators dissent from the community, but because in doing so they challenge the very existence of order based on consensus.[421]

The section entitled *Bid 'a* involves mainly Ruhiya with reference to her mother Hurra. The name Ruhiya, as the novel suggests, means 'spiritual or soulful woman,' which is exactly how Ruhiya's character is portrayed. The name Hurra means 'free woman.' These names signal a conscious fight for identity on both the individual and collective levels as they indicate an assertion of positions against the subordination of women. Both women are portrayed as helpless but through their helplessness they bring forth a perpetual drive towards socio-political consciousness against the containment and the control of women.

Hurra and Ruhiya bring the reader's attention to the double fight women experience against both patriarchy and occupation. Whereas the fight against patriarchy is suggested overtly in the narrative, the fight against occupation is implicit. This suggests that the liberation of women is an important factor to the liberation of the land. It is impossible to miss Ruhiya's spiritual, mystical and, above all, her defiant

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[421] Mernissi, 1996: 111

nature. She does not take anything as a 'default matter' nor does she affiliate with dominant socio-religious dogmas. This is manifested on several occasions until she finally performs the call for prayer. The narrator describes her as a child,

> 'As the little girl grew up, some noticed the directness of her gaze and commented on her unwillingness to drop it. The more avid gossips said her eyes shone brighter at night and that they darkened into a deep red gold, like those of a fox on the prowl.'[422]

The importance of the gaze is that it secures power over the gazed upon. Ruhiya's gaze is culturally dangerous as the exclusive right of the gaze belongs to men only. Men view themselves as the rightful owners of what Lacan describes as the Symbolic Order, and therefore they secure their power over women, the passive and the silent, through making them objects of their controlling gaze.[423] Ruhiya's gaze and mysticism appear to threaten men's order and the whole society as it states a refusal to acknowledge submission and inferiority. By refusing to drop her gaze, Ruhiya denies men their alleged power. Describing her eyes as 'deep red gold like those of a fox' suggests wickedness, unnaturalness and exoticism, which are attributed to sin according to social standards. She represents the danger of a 'fox of the prowl' as she has the capacity to overthrow the whole patriarchal system and its rigid values.

The narrative makes use of cultural norms while it develops its own oppositional ones. The narrative reveals Ruhiya's remarkable voice as she reads the Qur'an. The narrator says, 'He [her father] had always loved her voice and complimented her on it. He even joked that had she been a boy, she would have taken over from him as the

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[422] *The Honey*, 19

[423] Tong, 1989. Lacan's Symbolic Order is what regulates society through the regulation of the individual. Society will produce itself in fairly constant way as long as individuals speak the language of the Symbolic Order – internalising its gender roles and class roles.

village *muezzin*.'[424] The word 'joked' here is significant because the joking issue in this quotation is actually a disturbing and a serious matter that women suffer from in the Arab World and elsewhere, which is the preference for boys over girls. By downplaying this preference, the novelist makes it insignificant and ridicules it. Ironically, Ruhiya ends up performing the *adhan*, an act which reverses gender dichotomies and the discourse of gender inequality.

Another incident occurs in the novel referring to this very same custom when Hurra gives birth to a girl, Ruhiya. Women in the village go to visit, but instead of congratulating her, they say,

> ''Thank God for your safety. If you give birth to a girl, you can give birth to a boy.'[Hurra] courteously replied to the astounded villagers that she had been hoping for a girl all along, and announced her daughter's name Ruhiya, an ancient pagan name unknown to any of the monotheistic religions, and defied them all to raise the flag of scandal about the muezzin's wife. And they did.'[425]

This incident is an ironic manifestation that shows that rigid patriarchal values are embodied also in women. Women are, indeed, trapped in the web of patriarchy. They support and practice the very same order that suppresses them. This element in the narrative suggests that the blame is not entirely on men, but on the whole socio-religious structure of society. By doing this, the narrative avoids recreating the gap between the sexes and puts the blame not only on the oppressor but also on those who support and submit to oppression.

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[424] *The Honey*, 13-4
[425] ibid: 18-9

Ruhiya and Hurra are spiritual and incompliant women as they disrupt dominant stereotypes and values, challenging socially ascribed roles and norms. The narrative proclaims the advantage of being 'Other.' It manifests that Otherness with all its associations with oppression and inferiority is much more than an oppressed, inferior condition. It is a way of being, thinking and speaking that allows for openness, plurality, diversity and difference. It allows women to challenge the patriarchal order, the dominant way of practicing religion and the inversion of prevalent hypocritical values. Ruhiya and Hurra are the powerful ones in this small village of Al-Ahmar; they are feared although they are subjected to oppression.

As a mystical character, Ruhiya wishes to express her love to God and could not understand why her love to her Creator should be subjected to men's domination. She disagrees with the traditional boundaries that restrict humans, and mostly women, from being equal servants of God. She could not understand why certain matters were exclusively for men and when certain women were included it is for men's pleasure and satisfaction. The narrator,

> 'She [Ruhiya] thought of Umm Kulthum, the Egyptian diva with the power to silence a nation with her song. Why was that woman's voice not 'awra? Ruhiya's grandmother told her that even in Jerusalem Umm Kulthum quietened entire neighbourhoods when she was on the radio, from Ras al-Amud to the Orthodox Quarter in the Old City, and that old men would sit twirling their moustaches and twisting their water-pipes pensively at her ballads. She told Ruhiya that from the money-changers and barber-shops on Salaheddin street to the university campuses in Bethlehem and Birzeit, eyes closed at her songs. And that there was never any trouble from the soldiers when Umm Kulthum sang. Because her songs were from the heart.'[426]

[426] ibid: 25

Acting 'from the heart' is one of the most crucial points to a mystical or a Sufi person. Sufis grope their way towards communion with God. Thus, for Ruhiya, it is not a sin to celebrate God and chant the *adhan*, feeling the love of God and announcing it to all people. Sufism gives more importance to the spiritual rather than the biological differences between men and women. It gives women a central place in the spiritual society. Leila Ahmed notes that among Sufi's 'women may surpass even the ablest of men and may be men's teachers in the domain of the spiritual and that interactions between men and women on the intellectual and spiritual planes surpassed in importance their sexual interactions.'[427] Hence, a woman's act of chanting the *adhan* is not a sin according to Sufi teaching as it is seen as one path to reach God.

There are several references to 'the path' in Ruhiya's section, which according to Sufism is the path towards spirituality, leading to the 'Beloved.' The novel suggests other embedded meanings to the 'path.' Ruhiya remembers her mother's words to her,

> 'She spoke of snakes hidden in the shortest grass and of roads invisible in daylight. She used to say, God will show you the path and guide your chosen journey, regardless of how occult it might seem at the beginning.'[428]

Hurra warns her daughter of dangers hidden in the form of oppression and rigid dogmas. Making decisions can be very difficult when one is faced with a lot of possibilities and impossibilities. She speaks of snakes, which is a biblical reference, suggesting evil and mischievous people who can deter a person from the right path and the inner Truth.[429] Hurra was a Christian and converted to Islam when she got married to Radwan. Although Hurra converts, the narrative does not show any bias towards one religion, but rather attempts to defy all religious discourse predominant

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[427] Ahmed, 1992: 97
[428] *The Honey*, 20
[429] According to Freud snakes are also a phallic symbol.

in society. The narrative also joins all three monotheistic religions in one theme: the love of God as opposed to rigid traditions. Hurra in defiance 'stood facing her bridegroom on the hill overlooking her birthplace and declared that there was only one God and Muhammad was his prophet, right there, beneath the tower of the Church of the Nativity.'[430]

Another reference to 'the path' emerges when Ruhiya leaves her house to look for someone to perform the *adhan* for the dawn prayer, but 'as her mother promised, another path appeared before her. She turned around and headed for the mosque, guided by the flamboyant bougainvillaea trees and the rows of jasmine.'[431] Ruhiya's choice to go through this path to perform the *adhan* herself is the main ground of the novel. She chooses to act according to her own will and wishes, disregarding all social restrictions. The path Ruhiya takes is the path to autonomy that would enable her to resist living under male authority and social boundaries that smother the individual's will. Ruhiya says,

> 'There was a time when speaking was forbidden, and it seemed so long ago. *I am bloated right now with the love God has shown me. But nothing has changed; I just am where I should be, holding my breath for an intrepid amount of time and asking the morning if she will be mine. Stand by me as I praise His greatness.*'[432]

This quote suggests an opening of a new era, and the rectifying of old ones. This new era is not based on power relations between the sexes where the interests of women are subordinate to those of men who regard themselves as supreme beings. Rather it is based on the reshaping, re-influencing and re-modifying of the existing power relations between men and women and handing back supremacy to God. This

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[430] *The Honey*, 14
[431] ibid: 23-4
[432] ibid: 26 (Italics in original text)

demonstrates a refusal of social, political and cultural degradation and links between mysticism and politics as a way of refusing the status quo. In 'The Unholy Trinity' Hager Ben Driss notes that mysticism, beyond its communion with God and the universe, is able to situate people as tiny beings in the universe and hence make them aware of a grand universe. This spiritual faith enables them to grow beyond social limits and refuse inequality.[433]

It is worth mentioning here that as Ruhiya calls for prayer, the novelist translates the first line of the *adhan* in the text '*La Ilaaha Illa Allah*' as 'There is no other God but me'[434] while in the glossary at the beginning of the narrative, it is translated as 'There is only one God.' In the former translation, not capitalising the pronoun 'me' which refers to God is an act that carries oblique dissident meanings. Assuming that this is not a typing mistake and is intentional on behalf of the novelist, it suggests that Ruhiya claims supremacy and divine authority.

Movements of political and religious dissent often necessitate different understanding of social aspects of Islam or any other religion, especially with matters related directly to women.[435] According to Nancy Shields Hardin, Sufism 'is not an organized religion with specific dogma.'[436] It rejects the artefacts that dominant societies impose on people, and therefore Sufis' understanding of religion and spirituality is not shared by ordinary people. While spiritual characters in the novel such as Asrar and Yehya find Ruhiya's voice sweet and healing, men in the village have a different reaction. For example, one man says,

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[433] Ben Driss, 2004: 79
[434] *The Honey*, 26
[435] Ahmed, 1992: 95
[436] Hardin, 1977: 316

> 'A miracle?! You blaspheme! It is a taboo for a woman to raise her voice! Now she raised it for all to hear, without shame, and worse she has done so in God's name. Oh, I never thought I would live to see a day as unclean as this. If we don't do the right thing, who knows what will come next?'[437].

Another man replies,

> 'I agree. This is a sign, a sign from God that our community has been polluted and must be cleansed. The soldiers were laughing at us today, pretending they had merely come to arrest some men! May they all be struck down by high blood pressure and diabetes! I wouldn't be surprised if this was their work, that there has been some collaboration with the enemy. A woman immodest enough to display her ecstasy to the entire world! She is obviously the perfect accessory for the Zionists…'
> '…Indeed, why should she stop at the Zionists?'[438]

Ruhiya's mysticism as well as her rejection of gender inequality become a covert political dissent. Male's desire for mastery and domination leaves them blind to the reality of things, as Asrar describes it in the *Kashf* section, 'Grown-ups are misguided. They guard against the Devil in all the wrong places.'[439] The unusual becomes a sign; drought is a sign from God that the community is polluted, earthquakes are another sign of a polluted community, and a woman speaking up represents a cursed community and a collaborator. Conquering women is the first mission on the occupier's agenda, just as oppressing them is the first mission of those occupied. In order to win the fight against the former, the occupied has to keep women under his control. If, however, women challenge this control, they are considered to be accepting the occupier's 'rape' and hence considered traitors. This is demonstrated in the above quote, when the man says, '[t]he soldiers were laughing at us today, pretending they had merely come to arrest some men!' This suggests that the fight is

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[437] *The Honey*, 81
[438] ibid: 81
[439] ibid: 82

not over the land any more and that the villagers lost a battle because of a woman's disobedience.

Ruhiya's social, political and religious protest is directed at the source of oppression, whether it is occupation and/or patriarchy. Unfortunately, her challenge of the patriarchal system makes her a collaborator with the occupier because although women are given important 'national' and 'religious' status, they are simultaneously denied any access to national or religious space and agency.[440]

Asrar sees Ruhiya as she performs the *adhan*, 'The two, one on the verge of womanhood and the other who had just *released herself from its constraints* so sensationally, started at each other like two cats from a different breed.'[441] Ruhiya asks Asrar to swear not to repeat what she saw. Asrar says:

> 'I would swear on the Qur'an, the Cross, the Torah.
> I would swear but everybody has already heard you,
> Ruhiya.'
> 'Ruhiya smiled. She spoke softly: 'Including God?'' [442]

Ruhiya shows feelings of content that her voice finally reached God. Ghandour explains in an interview that,

> The idea of Ruhiya singing to the heavens came from my yearning and desire to celebrate God over the rooftops. But the reality is that we, as women, are not supposed to raise our voices…Our voice is taboo. It is considered an adornment, hence an element of shame. A man has a voice in the public sphere, whereas our voices are domesticated, they are private.[443]

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[440] Grace, 2004: 161
[441] *The Honey*, 27 (Emphasis added)
[442] ibid: 27
[443] Melki, 2001

Maya, the foreign journalist, captures what could be the reaction of the community towards Ruhiya,

> 'This could lead to an honour killing. Definitely an incarceration of one kind or another, or an expulsion. If they had the means, they would be planning her lobotomy. She will be called majnouna[444], possessed by the jinn, the underground spirits of sewers and drains. Then there will have to be an exorcism.'[445]

Maya, whose name means the 'veil of illusion,' represents the imperial culture. She symbolises the international world which is induced by the power of media. As a journalist, she constitutes the most pivotal factor in the affiliation of Western thought worldwide and accounts of global discourse. For Maya, this incident of Ruhiya's call for prayer carries much more significance than any suicide mission by a Palestinian or massacre by the Israelis. It has more weight and substance to it. She says,

> 'Nowhere, never, has there been a woman muezzin, a muezzina.
> But there's Eid every now and then, predictable as my headlines
> and the festivals of his name sake.'[446]

Men's fight against occupation is not a novelty, but women's rebellion against oppression is a culturally unacceptable innovation. On a socio-linguistic level, the usage of the term '*muezzina*' carries with it subversion and inversion of the prevalent patriarchal order, as this term is exclusively masculine and has never been used to describe women.

Maya's journey to the village of Al-Ahmar represents a quest for understanding and survival in this chaotic environment. Although she does not know why, she recognises that the story of the suicide mission performed by Eid, and Ruhiya's *adhan*, referred

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[444] Insane
[445] *The Honey*, 56
[446] ibid: 55-56

to in the novel as a song, are one story not two. They are indeed one story; the story of the occupied, the inferior, the oppressed, the suppressed, the broken and the demoralised. They both represent one's consciousness against his/her inferiority and the action that must be taken to elevate one's self above humiliation and degradation. Both sexes are being violated on the land. Although women suffer twice the violation, both men and women should be committed to the same cause: freedom. Ruhiya, by breaking an Islamic tradition and taking her father's place on top of the minaret, symbolises all women in their quest to be truly heard.

To many Ruhiya's action is considering breaking an Islamic taboo, but to spiritual believers it recalls the mystical side of Islam. It touches Ghandour's main theme of salvation that is inherent in the land.[447] Both Ruhiya's healing voice and the appropriation of Palestine are ironically best described in Maya's section. One woman in the village explains,

> 'Like sugar, like honey. None of you know what you're talking about. Why don't you ask us about 1948? Was your mother born in 1948? We were yanked from our land like bad weeds forty-nine years ago. Smoked like a colony of bees from their hives so they could have the honey in the comb...You don't understand me, do you? That a flower emerges from soil. To appreciate her, you have to taste the mud that sprouts her from its belly. She is the question that had been left to germinate. We are all the result of a violation. And Ruhiya? More than anyone else. That girl has been praying to al-Aqsa all her life, to the Distant Mosque, all Glory be to God...Praying to Jerusalem instead of Mecca, may God forgive me. May he have mercy on my soul for saying it.'[448]

This remarkable explanation is the hidden truth behind the narrative. The honey is the land, as Palestine has been described in the Old Testament as the land of milk and honey. The above quotation captures a situation of havoc and chaos in a poetic and

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[447] Melki, 2001
[448] *The Honey*, 64-66

emotional voice, stating a repercussion to violation that the imperialist world and the patriarchal culture do not usually consider or perhaps disregard.

The land has been violated, but Ghandour points out that where violation occurs redemption lies. Ghandour says, 'co-existence between the people in a borderless land would be my destination.'[449] Redemption and co-existence are apparent themes in the second section of the novel. The section is called *Nushuz*, which literally means 'that which tries to elevate itself above the ground.' The term is predominantly used to describe a woman rebelling against her husband's authority. Mernissi defines the term as,

> *Nushuz* is a Qur'anic concept; it means the rebellion of the wife against her Muslim husband's authority. The Qur'an only refers to *nushuz* in order to describe the punishment a husband must inflict upon his wife in case she rebels. Ghazali defines *nushuz* (the woman who rebels) as a wife who confronts her husband either in act or word. He explains that the word *nashz* means 'that which tries to elevate itself above ground.''[450]

In this section, however, there is no reference to a woman rebelling against her husband or anyone else for that matter. The one who rebels is Yehya, whose name means 'life' or 'the will to live.' Ghandour again works within the system to deconstruct it. She transforms this religious term, *nushuz*, and directs it towards men rather than using it, as is common, against women. This suggests protest and dissent against the way the term is used and the predominant significance it underlines. It also suggests that religious and social equality between the two sexes is a necessity for a balanced society. The author reconstructs the socially constructed relationship between husband and wife and directs it towards what should be a relationship

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[449] Melki, 2001
[450] Mernissi, 1996: 109

between humans and God. Obedience is not a characteristic that is limited to women alone, but it is one of the qualities a believer should have with his/her God. Mernissi and Fatna Sabbah note that the ideal of female beauty in Islam is 'obedience, silence and immobility, that is inertia and passivity.' However, they claim that these characteristics are not only limited to women. 'these three attributes of female beauty are the three qualities of the believer vis-à-vis his God.' Sabbah claims that 'the believer must dedicate his life to obeying and worshipping God and abiding by his will.'[451] Hence, when a woman is '*nashiz*,' she is disobedient to God *not* to her husband and the same should be applied to men in the Sufi interpretation of the word. It is also worth mentioning here that the term '*nashiz*' is used for both male and female. Unlike most Arabic words, this word does not have a feminine version. This suggests that rebellion is not gender specific and that both men and women are equal in God's doctrines.

The narrative refers to Yehya as '*nashiz*' as he rebels against the dominant understanding of the socio-religious and political discourse. In this section, the narrative portrays Yehya's journey towards death and salvation. It suggests that men are also trapped in oppressive and exploitative political and religious discourse. This results in a cultural schizophrenia, manifest in the form of armed militancy, that is embodied in the struggle against occupation, modernity and against the hostility of the powerful and pervasive Western media.

The narrative rejects such hostile attitudes and warns against their outcome. It also warns against misinterpretations of *Shari'a* and the attribution of brutality and cruelty

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[451] ibid: 109. See also Sabbah, 1984

to God. Further, it suggests that cruel behaviour should not be attributed to God's words but to those who undertake their interpretation. Ruhiya says,

> 'I am worried about Yehya. He threw away his red kafiya. He said he no longer needed men's doctrines. All he needed is in the Holy Book including communism. The way he said Holy Book scared me, it made me want to run away from him. But he said within it was contained real political opposition and that God was on the side of the radical groups.'[452]

The narrative is highly committed to spiritual values as these values are the way to salvation. In an oblique way, it argues against the manipulation of the Qur'an as it has so far been a structural characteristic in practicing power in Muslim societies. The Qur'an is perceived by Muslims as the ultimate reference point for good and evil. It is viewed to set the parameters of human existence and to influence social structures and boundaries of appropriate behaviours. Therefore, the Qur'an is regarded as a political text that shapes the understanding of Muslim society.[453] The manipulation of such a powerful text means great social and political danger, which the narrative warns against.

Yehya sets out on a dangerous and fatal journey wrapped with explosives. Despite the danger attached to these explosives the narrative downplays their significance by comparing them to candy floss for children. He says,

> 'The explosives they gave me are weightless. Kilograms of unquantifiable material, butterflies in bushes to my heart. I can run around with them on my back, on my hips, in a bag, I could wear them in my shoes, strap them under my arms, balance them on my head. They're cotton wool, they're candy floss, they're for children. They're lightweight with wings. On which I ride I fly I die.'[454]

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[452] *The Honey*, 15
[453] See Shaikh, 1997
[454] *The Honey*: 33

Yehya reverses the significance of explosives and the significance of the death caused by them. Suicide missions are very common in Palestine; they are celebrated and considered necessary by most people in Palestine and the Arab World. The above quotation questions how people can be skilfully programmed to such 'cruel' dogmas that have made them conforming adults in a conforming society. Even though Yehya is violated and oppressed by the occupation, the discourse of the novel supports co-existence and redemption between oppressor and the oppressed. Ben Driss notes that 'mysticism also works as a camouflaged political discourse'[455] and Al-Musawi states that 'the Sufi discourse is an essential alternative because of its potency for oblique and exploding interpretations.'[456] Yehya's mysticism cannot be separated from political life. His mystic soliloquy is articulated in an oblique way and courts more than one interpretation. He contemplates,

> 'Is that a Jew I see before me? He doesn't look like one. He doesn't look like the Jews I know. A black-eyed boy, still as a hawk. I've crossed my tribes and several others, men from my region and his father's brothers, to find where he was at. To meet him here on this playground skullcap to skullcap and turn iron into mud. To die together a death with social significance and create a political moment.'[457]

Yehya protrudes out of the existing dominant contemporary fundamentalist discourse and refuses to submit to the suppressive authority, and therefore is '*nashiz*' to predominant socio-religious values in Ghandour's interpretation of the term. In Sufi discourse, the Sufi's isolation and withdrawal articulate a refusal of social and political degradation. Yehya says,

> 'I had stopped feeling pain, I had stopped expecting terrors. The injustice fell away like a badly formed idea and the shouting in

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[455] Driss, 2004: 79
[456] Al-Musawi, 2003: 33
[457] *The Honey*, 41

> my ear stopped and the burns miraculously healed. My body stopped remembering, reminding. Finally I could access peace and Ruhiya distracted me.'[458]

Like the effect of honey on a lacerated throat, words through Ruhiya's song and her celebration of God managed to subdue and tame Yehya's violated spirit, showing him an alternative way of grieving and progressing. Yehya contemplates, '[t]he moon is long gone, martyrdom and murder are close.'[459] This manifests confusion and inability to distinguish between martyrdom as a religious merit and as murderous act. This confusion will not be understood unless people awake from the roles to which they have been programmed. Asrar recapitulates the current socio-political situation in the land and laments it when she says, 'as I walked next to my grandfather my eyes filled involuntarily with tears, because Eid [Festivities] is dead, and Yehya [the will to live] has disappeared.'[460]

Yehya's revolt against political corruption ends in a mystical mood, testifying that mysticism in this context is a covert political dissent. He says,

> 'The sky is pouring its honey along the Old City walls and I am again one of its subterranean rodents, still alive, still weak, still striving. It's time after all for *Salat al-Fajir*[461] and I turn south and kneel down, wondering how many ablutions it will take to rinse my unclean heart.'[462]

In a review of *The Honey*, Samia Nassar Melki notes that,

> Ghandour evokes the strong image of Palestinians seeping into Israel and onto Israelis like 'oozing onto them from an infected laceration,' the laceration symbolizing the slashing of Palestinian land. 'What I am trying to say,' says Ghandour, 'is that the situation is sickly, and Yehya is manifesting this sickness.' As the land is violated and disputed by two people, so is Hurra,

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[458] ibid: 38
[459] ibid: 41
[460] ibid: 84.
[461] Dawn Prayer
[462] *The Honey*, 43

> Ruhiya's Christian mother. Radwan, her husband, whose name means the merciful and forgiving, from the outset covers the tracks of his wife's violator, Farhan. Therefore, the daughter's transgression against male Islamic tradition is counter-acted by a male violation of the mother, the Earth.[463]

Another significant element in these two sections, *Bid 'a* and *Nushuz*, is that they are full of physical, sexual and blood metaphors not found in the other sections. Considering the themes and the characters portrayed in these two sections, the metaphors could be explained as a symbol to the blood relation between Ruhiya and Yehya as it is revealed later that they are brother and sister. It could also be because they are portrayed as the only characters to have strong physical connection to the land. The narrative links sexuality, honour and land in an act of dissent and rebellion against political and patriarchal manipulation in society.

5.3 Politicised Sexuality

Politics, mysticism and sexuality are the themes that define the structure of *The Honey*. The three elements function in a circular movement with the density of dissenting temper that undermines and challenges social norms. This circularity results in ambiguity as the reader is never sure whether it is a political manifestation that leads to a sexual scene or a mystical mood or vice versa.[464]

Like mysticism, Driss argues, sexuality, in the Sufi discourse, is not a strategy of textual adornment, nor is it a type of crude eroticism meant to create a sensational effect or to sell better. Sex, in this context, operates to denounce political and social

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[463] Melki, 2001
[464] See Driss, 2004

corruption, and neo-patriarchy. Losing or loosening one's sexual instincts is given much more importance than actual political and social anarchy.[465]

Desire undermines patriarchy as it is a site of recognising the self against entrenched customs and deeply rooted assumptions. There are many parallels between dissent and sexuality in the novel that protest against claims that women's bodies and sexuality are a threat to the well-being of a society. Ruhiya's call to prayer is sexualised and/or mystified in an act of rebelling against male supremacy,

> 'This was the first in the village of al-Ahmar. Never before had the call to the dawn prayer been howled and moaned with this much pleasure. And in their sleep, the villagers were willing to overlook the fact that it was being sung by a woman. But when they were woken up that morning by Ruhiya's song, they stumbled out of their beds and ran out into their gardens with dread and disbelief. For the women immediately knew she would pay for this pleasure, even though it had been so gracefully displayed. And the men? The men felt her song pierce through their hearts like a burning spear.'[466]

Sexuality is an instrument of oppression practiced by both coloniser and colonised against women albeit in different ways. Sexual liberation can be a component of national liberation, the emancipation of women and a form of equality. The novel refers to sexuality as part of the spirituality that is needed in the land. Redemption will not be accomplished unless people undergo a profound transformation in the way they perceive power and love.

Yehya's journey to death and salvation is also surrounded with sexual metaphors. The narrative demonstrates through Yehya that sexuality is closely related to political activities. Hence, his perpetual struggle is to find both sexual and political stability.

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[465] ibid:81-83
[466] *The Honey*, 28

This is revealed in the way Yehya describes the point of detonating the explosives. He contemplates, 'and finally to reach the point of love, the summit of healing, the centre of softness.'[467]

The narrative reveals an incest relationship between Ruhiya and Yehya as they turn out to be siblings. The novelist mixes sexual instincts with chaos to create a type of sexual degeneration blended with political and social corruption. Sexual degeneration is expressed in terms of dissent and rebellion. Yehya remembers Ruhiya's anger,

> '...sternly and loudly: 'My voice is taboo.' Harshly she would repeat her admonishment, disbelieving it from her core. 'Does my voice stir you, Yehya? Am I prompting you to sin? Yes, yes, Ruhiya, your voice creates a disorder and an agitation inside me and I wish I could fly with the same grace and not choke with this despair.'[468]

Towards the end, Ruhiya and Yehya escape to the desert from social and political realities and hardships of both war and of living in occupied Palestine, defying both cultural expectations and sexual taboos.

Furthermore, the narrative manifests a sexualised yearning for the land. Whether the land is yearned for by the occupied or sought for by the occupier, it has a significant emotional impact on people's lives. Palestine, although not discussed openly in the narrative, is anything but neutral. *The Honey* represents the battle between the occupier and the occupied over the land through honour and rape and their importance in Arab society. In this, the novelist does not divorce the struggle against sexual oppression and discrimination from the national one against occupation. In this

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[467] *The Honey*, 35
[468] ibid: 37

respect, *The Honey* reveals a double narrative, one that implicitly deals with the loss of honour as a result of the loss of land and another explicitly demonstrates the loss of honour through the violation of a woman, Hurra, by the Honeyman, Farhan.

A Bedouin man tells Radwan, Hurra's husband, '[t]he earth and the stone on which this village is built cannot absorb an injury to your honour. It will remain a stain.'[469] This quotation connects the actual rape to the occupation of land as both violations are seen as one. They will both remain a scar and a stain on people's identity and history. Hurra's rape is an allegory of the national struggle against the occupation. It is also a paradigm of identification and fusion between mother and land, which is a common theme in Palestinian literature. This symbolism attracts many divergent elements. It shows the havoc in the land caused by the brutality of the occupier and connects it to the havoc caused by the brutality of patriarchy and 'religious' traditions used to contain women in the region.

Radwan is portrayed as a religious and peaceful man. Al-Musawi notes that the presence of Shaykhs, or religious men, in such novels, is usually followed on the narrative level by action that moves through restlessness, anxiety and expectation. The religious man shows up in times of crisis through others' search for counsel and blessing. He implies that both social tension and individual distress are usually combined are a result of political corruption and injustice. He endorses individual action that 'serves God rather than the devil.'[470] Radwan chooses to pray for Hurra's soul rather than revenge her death.

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[469] ibid:79
[470] Al-Musawi, 2003: 263

However, it is important to mention here that some parts of the narrative echo colonial discourse in its feminisation of the land. The native woman, Hurra, is represented as 'wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman'[471] and the native man, Radwan, is effeminised, simple and a fool. This colonialist discourse is mostly apparent in the last section narrated by the Honeyman. He describes Hurra saying,

> 'Her heavy veil, embroidered in silver thread, framed a face conceived in alabaster and her eyelashes were cast so low she looked as though she were sleep walking. And nothing in the witch hinted at the indigo eyes.'[472]

The terms used in the above quotation are very much similar to terms used by colonialists to describe Oriental women. Hurra is an image of Oriental barbarity, hence, 'witch' and 'she could have been instructing angels and collaborating with the underworld in the same breath.'[473] She also represents female helplessness and devotion 'eyelashes were cast so low' and 'she trailed behind the *muezzin* like a scent.'[474] The Honeyman constantly describes Hurra as a victim, for example, 'she was a strange victim'[475] or when Hurra dies before his eyes, he says, 'technically I killed her,'[476] which, according to Loomba, is another characteristic of colonial discourse in representing 'brown' or 'black' women.[477]

Asrar's section also portrays the Honeyman in a manner that is similar to descriptions of colonialists. She says, 'I saw what the Honeyman did to Hurra, how he had unveiled her, and what she did to herself.'[478] The act of unveiling is a vital link

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[471] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 151
[472] *The Honey*, 92
[473] ibid: 95
[474] ibid:.92
[475] ibid: p. 97
[476] ibid: p. 99
[477] Loomba, 2000 (1998): 154
[478] *The Honey*, 75-6

between the Honeyman and the colonialist as unveiling the native woman is a mission the colonialist took on himself in order to 'liberate' her. However, unveiling here implies more than the removal of a piece of clothing. Asrar has seen how the Honeyman stripped Hurra of her inner strength, peace of mind, and self-respect. The above examples indicate the intricate overlaps between colonial and patriarchal sexual domination inside and outside the narrative.

Whilst the colonialist justifies his violation as a mission to 'liberate' the native woman from the barbarity or foolishness of the native man, the Honeyman justifies and attributes his evil violation to God. He says, 'And who's to say I wasn't right, that I wasn't fulfilling a higher will, unpredictable and immovable? God's will be done, I thought it was the way of the warrior to go, to lose myself, and then I froze.'[479]

The narrative, again, warns against such rigid dogmas and their attribution to religion. At the same time, it suggests that the fear of losing the land prompts instability and havoc among people. Sexuality becomes a means for maintenance or erosion of one's identity. This is evident in Ruhiya and Yehya's relationship. While they turn out to be brother and sister the narrative describes them as 'the siblings of Farhan's split seed,'[480] which could be a reference to the split seed of Arabs and Jews. The novel highlights the cruelty and inhumanity of occupation and war as well as rigid dogmas through sexuality, abuse or frustration. In desire and body inscriptions lay the commitment to life against war, and erosion against death,[481] which is evident in *Nushuz* section in which Yehya chooses life. Al-Musawi notes that desire is also used as a strategy to undermine patriarchy 'not only through narrative design and wit, but

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[479] ibid: 97-8
[480] ibid: 84
[481] See Al Musawi 2003 and Loomba, 2000 (1998)

also through systematic unveiling of a system that levels the blame on the other, in this case women, for its own omissions and faults.'[482]

Ghandour does not overlook the issue of the veil in the narrative as it appears to be one of the most contested stereotypes and conflicting matters in the representation of Muslim women to the West. The narrative offers a mystical understanding of this issue as part of the political and social struggle. To perceive Muslim women's own representation on this matter and the contesting views they offer to the Western reader, the following section will discuss how three different novelists, including Zeina Ghandour, portray the veil in three very different ways. The following analysis will focus on the socio-political representations of the veil as they are represented without referring to other elements portrayed in these novels.

5.4 Mystic Visions of the Veil

'God, if Thou must torture me with something, don't torture me with the humiliation of the hijab.'[483]

The veil is one of the most controversial issues surrounding the Arab/Muslim woman today. The West, until today, is not able to comprehend and understand this phenomenon. It has been used at various stages of the colonial and postcolonial periods as the most visible marker of the inferiority of Islamic cultures. The most recent debates around the veil are exhibited by Western attempts, especially France and Britain, to ban it completely as it is considered a marker of religious identity and the sole cause of women's oppression in Muslim communities.

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[482] Al-Musawi, 2003: 36
[483] al-Naisāburi, 1980: 18

The veil, as Judy Mabro warns, is a powerful symbol that can blind people into false generalisations.[484] A set of images are usually associated with the veil in Western media, 'oppression,' 'passivity,' or 'terrorism.' Europeans, since the nineteenth century, were curious to learn about other cultures only at a level that would confirm their superiority. They have failed to understand the meanings and symbols surrounding the veil in the traditional and religious sense. As a result of Western prejudice against veiled women and Islam, the veil acquired a political meaning. It became a sign of an Islamic identity and a political protest. Soueif describes the woman wearing the *niqab* (the black veil that covers the face) as one who says loud and clear, 'I am a political Islamist. I believe our only solution lies in creating an Islamic state.'[485]

In literature, the veil is portrayed as a trope of varying symbolism surrounding women and national identity. In *The Woman in the Muslin Mask* Daphne Grace suggests that within the parameters of misogyny, patriarchal denial and fear 'the veil acts to eliminate expressions of both difference within and unity of female identity; it both defines and disguises the individual self.'[486]

Because 'the veil is used as a self-conscious literary device and a means of social and political comment,'[487] the image of the veiled woman is ambivalent and shifting. The veil is a site of nationalist – whether traditional or revolutionary – ideologies and gender identity discourses. To examine the traditional and the revolutionary

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[484] See Mabro, 1991
[485] Soueif, 2004: 273
[486] Grace, 2004: 2
[487] ibid: 7

representations of the veil portrayed in Anglophone literature written by women, this section will discuss the veil portrayed in *The Honey* as a Sufi concept with reference to *The Translator* in order to analyse this phenomenon within its socio-religious, patriarchal and political contexts. Although the veil has been discussed in a previous chapter, its examination was from a Western point of view. This section will solely focus on Muslim women surrounded by this phenomenon.

The Honey portrays different meanings to the veil in terms of reality and metaphor using Sufi concepts. It locates the veil as emblematic of not only women's oppression but also men's. The mystical narrative refers to the veiled as someone who is mentally and emotionally blind to truth and reality. In Sufism, *hijab* is considered a negative phenomenon. The *hijab*, which literally means a curtain, is what separates Man from God and blocks knowledge of the divine. It deters the person from the right path and blurs the eye from seeing the visible. Ruhiya tells Yehya as he goes on his suicide mission, 'you are like me. You're wearing a veil but it's your heart that's hid in it and you will not be discovered until it is too late.'[488]

Mernissi defines the veiled according to Sufi belief,

> In Sufism, one calls *mahjub* (veiled) the person whose consciousness is determined by sensual or mental passion and who as a result does not perceive the divine light in his soul. In this usage it is man who is covered by a veil, or a curtain, and not God. In Sufi terminology, the *mahjub* is the one who is trapped in earthly reality, unable to experiment with elevated consciousness. The person who is not initiated into Sufi discipline does not know how to explore his extraordinary capacities for multiple perceptions which, through training and discipline, can be raised out of the realm of the physical and directed toward on high, toward Heaven, toward the divine.[489]

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[488] *The Honey*, 39
[489] Mernissi, 1991: 95

For Sufis, the opposite of hijab is *kashf*, which is the title of the section Asrar (secrets) narrates in the novel. *Kashf* is defined in the novel as 'the uncovery; the removal of the veil; revealing the reality beneath.' Grace notes that *kashf*, in this context, is a metaphor of sight, 'when we see not only with the eyes but with the heart, when the veils are lifted 'between the creation and the Real.'[490] Asrar is portrayed as a spiritual character who can see 'into the heart of nature,' she is able to bring forth the naturalness of life, spiritual insights and able to unveil realities.

The metaphysical and the supernatural are recurrent themes in this section because *kashf* in Sufi terminology means to expose the heart to metaphysical illumination or revelation unattainable by reason. Asrar can see through Ruhiya and her song (the call for prayer). She can see and hear Yehya across the desert and is able to feel his agony. She says, 'I felt his feet [Yehya] pressing against the thick carpets inside like the lips of God on my heart.'[491]

The narrative depicts the whole of the Arab/Islamic nation as a society that is suppressed by mental and emotional veil. They are unable to see the reality and the truth behind the Creator and the created as their eyes are veiled with oppressive and rigid socio-political ideologies, misinterpretations and/or misrepresentations of Islam. The novel concentrates on the veiled minds and hearts in an attempt to unveil the truth and guide people to salvation and redemption.

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[490] Grace, 2004: 123
[491] *The Honey*, 75

The narrative does not disregard the veil as part of the patriarchal system that dominates women. It emphasises that current patriarchal interpretations of Islam sanction a gendered discourse of inequality. The institution of the veil is one method of secluding women and restricting them in the public and private spheres. In every step Ruhiya takes through her journey to autonomy, she takes off the veil suggesting that it is another symbol of women's oppression that should be gotten rid of. Asrar says,

> 'Then she [Ruhiya] laid her *hijab* on the floor and, with her loose, damp hair falling about her shoulders, prostrated herself for prayer. At the end she whispered: 'You who guides us on our path, show us the road to paradise,' and repeated it a hundred times.'[492]

The novel suggests that Ruhiya unveiled herself literally and metaphorically. She got rid of the *hijab* that separates her from her Creator and also positions her as inferior to men. Yehya, as a symbol of life and elevation, asks Ruhiya to take off her veil so she can feel the air on her neck and be his equal. He says, 'don't you want to be like me?'[493] suggesting that the veil imposed on women eradicates women's agency and identity. The mystical discourse of the narrative subverts the dominant misunderstanding of religion and therefore the dress code imposed on Muslim women. Ghandour, cleverly, makes use of her understanding of Islam, using the spiritual side of it to challenge and negate people's socio-religious beliefs, without negating the fundamental nature of 'true' Islam.

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[492] ibid: 74
[493] ibid: 17

A different kind of Islamic discourse is depicted in *The Translator,* which regards veiling as an inherent part of Islamic requirements for gender segregation and for modesty and piety. It represents the veil as a sign of liberation, on both the individual and the cultural levels. It is revealed as a symbol of religious identity and as a political protest against Western prejudices. When Sammar is faced with an empathetic Western woman, the narrator says,

> 'Her [Sammar's] Head in the Languages department was a woman named Jennifer, who one day, unexpectedly and abruptly, called Sammar, asked her to sit down and said that she was not religious but respected people who were religious. That was during the Gulf War, when suddenly everyone became aware that Sammar was Muslim. Once a man shouted at her in King Street, 'Saddam Hussein, Saddam Hussein'…for example, Jennifer said, 'I have no problem at all with the way you dress.'[494]

As mentioned in chapter two, the discourse of *The Translator* is a reconciliatory one.

The motive behind the narrative is to reconcile Western prejudices with Islamic traditions and to reveal to the Western reader that veiled women are normal women rather than oppressed. The novelist portrays that wearing the veil is merely about being a good Muslim woman who takes pride in her religion and culture. She also implies that wearing the veil is a means of distancing women from their sexuality and protecting them from the male's gaze. The novelist also negates the claim that Muslim women are inferior. The narrator says,

> 'She [Sammar] covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours. She wanted to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerising as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing *hijab*…'[495]

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[494] *The Translator*, 99-100
[495] ibid: 9

This quotation has a political statement behind it. The fabric of the veil described above reveals a superior class, which contradicts the Western discourse in which the veil is politically charged with connotations of the inferior 'other.'[496] Aboulela reveals in the narrative that veiled women can be from an upper-class, educated, and liberal, but according to their own terms. Women who do not adopt a Western life-style are not inferior or suppressed because they do it out of their own choice.

The Translator until the end regards the veil as one of the main ingredients of Islamic law and an important part of Muslim women's identity. *The Honey,* however, continues till the last pages to depict it as an oppressive phenomenon that sanctions a gendered discourse of inequality and keeps men and women away from truth and salvation.

Although both novels in the above section are written by Muslim women, disagreement on this rather sensitive and highly political issue is not unlikely. Each narrative has a different agenda behind its publication and behind targeting the Western audience. The reconciliatory discourse of *The Translator* is one that reverses the dominant discourse of Western superiority to Muslim's superiority. Thereby, the narrative falls in the same trap into which crusaders, colonialists and Orientalists fell.[497]

As for *The Honey*, the message it sends to the Western reader is different. It seems to be more focused on redemption and co-existence between all sects of society. The narrative does not represent any form of superiority or inferiority other than the one

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[496] Grace, 2004: 21
[497] See chapter two.

based on good faith and belief, which is how God sees His creatures. It suggests equality between all people, women and men, and the need for a spiritual answer to social problems as well as the need for spiritual healing. It exposes to the Western reader that contrary to the dominant Western belief that Islam is a wicked and vicious religion that harbours terror and injustice, it is one that promotes peace, justice and equality between all humans. The narrative also reveals that the veil is one of many misconceptions of Islam that are based on its misunderstanding and misrepresentations by its very own followers. However, both narratives demonstrate that women understand the power of the image and manipulate it to their advantage.

5.5 Conclusion

The Honey takes a new perspective on the themes of politics and war, suicide and liberation. It does not achieve this by dictating to the reader, or programming them to the values it attempts to promote. Rather it deconstructs the dominant values and shows them to be destructive and impotent in the middle of the present socio-political chaos. At the same time, the novelist deconstructs Western views regarding Islam, revealing that contrary to what is believed, this religion is one that promotes peace and equality.

The Honey does not conclude with a moral lesson, happy or tragic ending. In fact, it has no ending and one is left perplexed and mystified from the first pages till the end.

This appears to be one of many characteristics of Sufi narrative. Hardin explains,

> Whereas the ordinary expectations from a story of the oral tradition are (1) entertaining and (2) a moral answer or solution of some sort, the Sufi teaching story has its function neither of these. Sometimes it does have a barbed, gallows sort of humour, but a moralistic solution is never the point. On the contrary, the Sufi teaching story is open-ended, depending on individual

> members of the audience for a variety of interpretations. Unlike most stories, the Sufi story becomes a means, rather than an end; significantly, these stories are intended to change the form of the thinking process itself.'[498]

The novel sets out to change the Western thinking process of Islam. It shows the spiritual side of it that is rarely presented by the Western media. It challenges the idea that Islam is a monolithic religion that oppresses women and stresses on its spiritual side as the way to salvation. It reveals that misunderstandings and misrepresentations of religion are the result of the dominant patriarchal and imperial discourses. Therefore, religion should not be held responsible.

The novel discussed in this chapter highlights the role of gender politics and morality codes as well as their utilisation in Arab women's victimisation by patriarchal laws in the name of Islam and 'cultural authenticity.' Despite their disagreement, both Ghandour and Aboulela emphasise that religion does not sanction a gendered discourse of inequality. Although the two Muslim novelists disagree on whether to consider the veil as part of Islamic requirement or not, their desire for change is very omnipresent. This change must include both civilisations (East and West) in order to co-exist.

The Honey deconstructs and reconstructs personal and national identities. It suggests that some will be able to overcome the voices of authority, other people's opinions, and the dogmas that have made people become compliant adults to strict dogmas. It also suggests that people should awaken from the roles to which they have been programmed and start thinking of a new beginning.

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[498] Hardin, 1997: 314

Chapter Six

6. Conclusion

Literature offers one of the most important ways of expressing perceptual frameworks of contemporary peoples. It offers a voice to the marginalised and reveals the tension and ambivalence that exist in the cultural encounter between East and West. The literature analysed demonstrates that women's history is not separated from national struggles, especially in colonial contexts where women have been held prisoners to both the coloniser and the colonised. This literature is a response to colonialism/imperialism which has marginalised cultures, traditions and the values of colonised nations. It is also a response to the male-dominated canon, which has suppressed women's voices and confined their agency in society. Toril Moi quotes Elian Showalter,

> Women writers should not be studied as a distinct group on the assumption that they write alike, or even display stylistic resemblances distinctively feminine. But women do have a special history susceptible to analysis, which includes such complex considerations as the economics of their relation to the literary marketplace; the effects of social and political changes in women's status upon individuals, and the implications of stereotypes of the woman writer and restrictions of her artistic autonomy.[499]

The sample of contemporary Anglophone literature introduced in this research provides diverse representations of women's realities along with the relationship between the sexes and the relationship between East and West. The analysed literature reveals that there are often different and contradictory roles associated to women in fiction. These roles are reflective of socially constructed gender stereotypes. The literature contains notions of displacement, resistance, rupture and

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[499] Moi, 2002 (1985): 49

also perpetuation of prevalent discourses on gender relations and of systems of knowledge on Arab/Muslim culture, and Arab/Muslim women in particular.

Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Zeina Ghandour's *The Honey* represent a total inversion of the prevalent patriarchal and colonial orders. Both narratives disrupt dominant stereotypes and values creating women who struggle to free themselves from socially ascribed norms and roles. Their resistance is enclosed in the paradigm of binary oppositions between male/female, and coloniser/colonised, which are characteristics of both patriarchal order and colonial discourse. The heroines in these novels are characters that thirst for freedom and are impatient for self-discovery. Both narratives suggest that the liberation of individuals is associated with their sexual freedom.

Sexuality is a vital component of human identity. Most writers do not write about sex out of sexual obsession but because of its symbolic meaning in politics and culture. Sex becomes a metaphor, motif or a symbol for domination to both the authoritative power and the subordinate subject. It is also a symbol for domination between women and men through which men compete to suppress the female's body and voice. The image of the 'perfect' and the 'imperfect' woman is created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. This is a result of men's fear of the 'Otherness' of women, which is based on the presumption that male's characteristics are set as the norm, while the female's are 'alien.' Through this assumption the subordination and oppression of women is justified.

The exclusion of sexuality in *The Translator* and *The Map of Love* is also significant. It suggests that women's emancipation is second to the nation's freedom. Both narratives demonstrate that women's struggle should be directed towards national independence in the case of Soueif's narrative, or Islamic triumph in the case of Aboulela. In the process, *The Translator* and *Coloured Lights* recreate the idea of a subordinate female. They draw on Islam and the traditional roles ascribed to women as passive, docile and dependant wives. Occasionally, they disrupt what should not be disrupted, such as motherhood. Although both narratives attempt to reconcile two civilisations, but in their claim that Muslims are superior to non-Muslims, the novelist uses a reverse of the very same colonial order she tries to diminish. The narratives also employ the patriarchal order by suggesting that the East should adopt the material progress of the West, but must keep the 'spiritual' preserved from any contaminated influence.

The Map of Love is concerned mainly with re-writing the history of Egypt from an Egyptian point of view. It attempts to correct many misconceptions and misunderstandings regarding historic events and cultural norms. In this process, the Arab woman is hardly heard although she is the narrator and the main protagonist. Soueif, does not represent the Arab woman as subordinate. Rather, she seems to be postponing the emancipation of women as she concludes that the whole nation is in fact subordinate to Western powers. The nation is the main priority in this novel.

Whether they disrupt or perpetuate, this research demonstrates that Arab women have started to recover their voices and release themselves from patriarchy and colonialism. These women articulate their voices in a cultural dialogue in an attempt to condemn

male-dominant canon and the imperialist discourse. These novels reveal that women have started to rise from their traditional enclosure to enter an open field of creative struggle in which women's output is dominant. Fatima Mernissi links patriarchy and colonialism as two oppressive systems and draws similarities between the struggle of national independence and the women's struggle for freedom. She states,

> We certainly need to help these men face reality, to see that the obedient creature has disappeared from earth – and the earth includes the Arab world! No 'cultural specificity' can save Muslim politicians from having to face independent women, in the same way as our 'sacred culture' was unable to prevent the banning by the British and French colonial powers in 1807 of the slavery fought for by the Arab states.[500]

Arab women have always been victims of stereotyping, whether it is a result of Western misinformation and lack of awareness, or Eastern traditions and their obsession in imprisoning women. Women do not underestimate the difficulty of changing these stereotypes, but they try to confront them according to their own pace and terms within the reality of their own culture. Hence, texts written by Arab women should not go unnoticed, for they are attempts to influence and modify society. These texts bring out a 'new kind of woman' and a new way to experience her existence.

Excluding *The Translator*, the novels analysed do not conclude by fixing the heroines lives. In both novels, Soueif leaves her heroines with probably more conflicts than those they had already at the beginning of the narratives. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, Asya returns to Egypt with the ability to connect with her Islamic/Arabic culture but without ignoring the acquired Western values. In this novel, Soueif suggests that women should not deny or reject different paradoxes and conflicts in their lives, but they should accept and comprehend them. Only then will women be able to face the

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[500] Mernissi, 1996: xiv

oppression they suffer from and promote change. Amal in *The Map of Love* is faced with the complex reality of her nation, finding that the past is easier to understand than the intricate present. Rayya, in *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, is finally able to enter Palestine after the death of her lover, but continues to fight for the freedom of her nation in disguise. Ruhiya in *The Honey* disappears in the desert without resolving the conflicting issues in her life. She runs away from social and political realities and hardships of both war and of living in occupied Palestine, defying both cultural expectations and sexual taboos. *The Translator*, however, is the only narrative in which the heroine accomplishes what she had desired for. The narrative suggests at the end that Sammar marries Rae after he converts, indicating that faith and love can be joined together in an act of reconciliation. However, Sammar never really questions herself about whether the dilemmas she faced and the passivity that she suffered from in both Britain and the Sudan are a result of being a Muslim or being a woman? Through focusing on religious discourse and the reactionary norms in her culture, Sammar's self-representation fails to recognise that her inferiority and passivity are a result of restrictive norms placed on women to limit their agency and to remain subordinate to the male figure in her life.

Arab women, whether living in the West or the East, have the difficult task of escaping stereotypes due to socio-political reasons. These women attempt to write in English as this act will guarantee a wider readership. It also helps them escape some of the restrictions they might find from some conventional agencies in the Arab World. Through targeting the Western reader, these novels are also a manifestation of the need to illuminate misconceptions, misunderstandings and confusions of the

Arab/Islamic world, and Arab women in particular. They are a significant and compelling form of narrating women's realities, visions and ambitions.

Women's resistance in literary texts provide an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of subjugated women. They provide an important counterpoint to the silencing and erasure of women in colonialist and patriarchal discourses. The novels analysed in this research deliver a 'truth' about Arab women living in Western societies or Muslim ones. They express the Arab woman's voice. They offer true and authentic stories of the situation of Arab women, as opposed to the negative Western or Oriental stereotypes. The narratives demonstrate a desire by each novelist to become native informants and to re-value the weak and the subjugated. Soraya Antonius says, 'those who write in foreign languages are really translators of their own essence.'[501]

Although I have been referring to women who live in the Arabic-speaking world as 'Arab women,' I do not believe that this term is the most adequate one due to dissimilarities in regional cultures. One cannot claim that the realities and the experiences of women around the Arab world are the same. Women in Oman are not similar to those in Lebanon, Palestinian women are different from Saudi or Yemeni women, Algerian women's experiences do not resemble those of Iraq's or Egypt's. Nevertheless, in each country women are struggling for various reasons and against different systems of 'oppression.' The protagonists portrayed in the chosen novels are from different regional and class backgrounds. They manifest assertion, strength, rebellion, and complexity in their fight against oppression. To be oppressed does not

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[501] Antonius, 2000: 55

mean to be a passive victim of oppression. These women are trying to develop strategies that would give them maximum control over their lives and bodies.

To represent the Arab woman, her culture and religion is not a simple task. Contemporary Arab/Muslim women face many conflicts and contradictions within their societies. Representing them is a complicated task as it is always reflective of socially constructed stereotypes. One cannot say that these representations do not suffer from inconsistencies because if they represent reality, the reality of Arab women is full of contradictions and not easy to grasp. Arab/Muslim women must find a space of their own making that transcends the problems of patriarchy to regain agency in society. Graciela Hierro offers a morality in gender relations which carries its own utopia. She says,

> This alternative morality is based in the values that have traditionally been considered feminine and whose ultimate goal is the opposite of power, that is, pleasure. This utopia is constructed around a nonhierarchal social organisation not geared toward dominion but toward shared authority, regardless of gender. This organisation is a necessary condition for the disruption of hierarchal power and the liberation of pleasure.[502]

This study brought a major corpus of work to the attention of the English speaking public who may still not be entirely familiar with it. These novels, although highly acclaimed, are ignored by most critics. They construe a postcolonial position and represent the Arab woman to the Western world in the middle of traditions, religion, patriarchy and (post)colonialism. These texts are about self-representation as opposed to their representations by others.

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[502] Hierro, 1994, 174

What I hope I have contributed in this research is a better understanding of Arab women, Arab culture and the way cultural and gender domination has operated for decades. Being an Arab woman has helped me to understand and to relate to many of the issues discussed. It made me realise that universal definitions that are dominant in the Arab World of 'good' and 'bad,' 'right' or 'wrong' are never appropriate. It also made me realise that the Arab world needs to undertake serious efforts at self-understanding, which, in turn, will enable them to communicate with others.

In the present time, it is hard to identify and locate one's freedom in a site of confusion and ambivalence. But it is very easy to feel the surrounding boundaries that restrict and suffocate the self. The struggle stretches far beyond the viable when it is directed against colonialism, patriarchy, socio-religious values and everything embedded in these three powerful institutions. To be an Arab/Muslim woman today means you are at the bottom of the hierarchy and the struggle will entail major losses and sacrifices in order to be heard and bring about change. However, to suggest that Arab/Muslim women are liberated and free individuals is the same as claiming that they are suppressed and marginalised. Both claims are in complete denial of reality to suit a particular context. The circumstances that Arab women live in today are far more complex to be summarised in a few words. Nevertheless, women, more than ever, serve as icons and participants in national and political movements in ways that are both restrictive and potentially liberating.

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